Volume 32 number 3 Autumn 1991 £6.95 $14

Screen

Box office attractions

Hanns Eisler in Hollywood

Black feminism and television

Cyborg discourses

Subscription & order information

Screen is published four times a year at an annual subscription for institutions of UK and Europe £38, USA and Rest of the World US$80 for individuals of UK and Europe £21, USA and Rest of the World US$45 and for Students and Unemployed UK and Europe £17 50 USA and Rest of the World US$38 Prices include postage by surface mail or for subscribers in the USA Canada, Japan India, Australia and New Zealand, by Air Speeded Post

Payment is required with all orders and subscriptions are accepted and entered by the volume(s) Payment *may be made by the following* methods Cheque (made payable to Oxford University Press), National Girobank (Account 500 1056), Credit Card (Access Visa, American Express, Diners Club) UNESCO Coupons Bankers Barclays Bank plc PO Box 333 Oxford Code 20–65–18 Account 00715654 Individual rates apply only when copies are sent to a private address and are paid for by personal cheque or credit card

Please send orders and requests for sample copies to Journals Subscriptions Department Oxford University Press Pinkhill House Southfield Road, Eynsham Oxford OX8 1JJ Telex 837330 OXPRESG

© 1991 The John Logie Baird Centre No article may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or *mechanical including photocopy* recording or any information storage and retrieval system without the permission in writing of the editors and the publisher **Screen** Incorporates **Screen Education**

ISSN 0036-9543

Cover illustration
Born Yesterday (Courtesy of Columbia Pictures Entertainment and B F I stills archive)

editors

John Caughie
Alan Durant
Simon Frith (Reports editor)
Sandra Kemp
Norman King
Annette Kuhn (Reviews editor)

issue editor

Annette Kuhn

editorial assistant

Sarelle Reid

editorial advisory board

Jennifer Batchelor (UK)
William Boddy (USA)
Annette Brauerhoch (Germany)
Beverley Brown (UK)
Giuliana Bruno (USA/Italy)
Charlotte Brunsdon (UK)
Alison Butler (UK)
Barbara Creed (Australia)
Sean Cubitt (UK)
John Fletcher (UK)
Claudia Gorbman (USA)
Pat Mellencamp (USA)
Mandy Merck (UK)
Steve Neale (UK)
Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (UK)
Julian Petley (UK)
Jackie Stacey (UK)
Will Straw (Canada)
Gillian Swanson (Australia)
Ginette Vincendeau (UK)

editorial address

The Editors, Screen
The John Logie Baird Centre
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8QQ

screen

32:3 Autumn 1991

JANET THUMIM: The 'popular', cash and culture in the postwar British cinema industry **245**

CLAUDIA GORBMAN: Hanns Eisler in Hollywood **272**

JACQUELINE BOBO and ELLEN SEITER: Black feminism and media criticism. *The Women of Brewster Place* **286**

CLAUDIA SPRINGER. The pleasure of the interface **303**

reports and debates

KEVIN ROBINS and LES LEVIDOW: The eye of the storm **324**

reviews

SUSANNAH RADSTONE: James Donald (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory. Thresholds*; E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* **329**

SANDRA KEMP. *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory*, nos 20–21 **339**

ANGELA McROBBIE: Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video and Feminism* **345**

ANDREW HIGSON: Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*; Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926–1946* **350**

The 'popular', cash and culture in the postwar British cinema industry

JANET THUMIM

In 1946 the 'Biggest Box Office Attraction' in the UK, according to *Kinematograph Weekly*'s (*KW*) annual review, was *The Wicked Lady*. It was also the 'Best British Film', featuring two of the 'Most Popular and Consistent Stars', James Mason and Margaret Lockwood; it had one of the 'Best British Directors', Leslie Arliss; and was made by the 'Most Successful Studio', Gainsborough. What does this string of superlatives tell us, though, about the film or its audience? Josh Billings, in his introduction to *KW*'s review, had no doubts about the solidity of the film's value:

> their success was no fluke They had the stars, the stories and the necessary production glamour and not even an indifferent Press could halt so persistent and shrewd a box-office combination.[1]

1 *Kinematograph Weekly* (*KW*), 19 December 1946 p 46

In *Tribune*, the 'indifferent press', in the form of Simon Harcourt-Smith reviewing the same film, clearly operated according to a quite different set of values:

> This, on the whole, is a time when the new films can claim no privilege as works of art. . . .
>
> *The Wicked Lady* arouses in me a nausea out of all proportion to the subject. . . .
>
> Six months hence one of my friends in the industry will announce that this portentous piece of shabbiness has broken all records in, let us say, Middlesbrough My argument will, however, remain valid.[2]

2 *Tribune* 23 November 1945

Now this film was the box-office hit of 1946, and thus in

quantitative terms an immense popular success. This very popular object, however, gave rise to Harcourt-Smith's admittedly disproportionate nausea: it was not well liked by him. His choice of the term 'nausea' indeed suggests such extreme revulsion that we might well wonder what it was about the film that so disturbed him. It is hard to believe, as he claimed elsewhere in his review, that it was simply a question of his historical sensibilities being offended. The most interesting question about the contemporary popularity of this film – what was it about 'this portentous piece of shabbiness' that was so well liked? – is one that Harcourt-Smith was incapable of answering, simply because it had not occurred to him that it was worth asking. For the cultural historian it is the very success of this film which provokes questions about its content: what pleasures did it offer, what widespread desires did it satisfy, in short, how was it *used* by its audiences? In other words the ascertainable fact of *The Wicked Lady*'s popularity in quantitative terms makes it an ideal candidate for an exploration of the qualitative aspects of popularity· despite Harcourt-Smith's nausea, large numbers of people chose to view this film: why *this* film?

The study of popular culture in any given period offers insights into both the conditions of social formation and also the language and attitudes of the various social groups competing with each other for dominance – in hegemonic struggle – at the time. This paper is concerned with the qualifications which must be borne in mind while engaging in such an exploration of cinema popular in Britain in the immediate postwar period (between 1945 and 1960). There are complex problems to be faced in the course of such an exploration of the discursive field within which meanings were produced by the industry, the critics and the audience. Though all three groups both contributed to and drew upon this discursive field, it is no simple matter to discover the details of specific interventions My concern here is to map some points in the field, to draw attention to tendencies rather than attempt categorical assertions about the substantive interactions of these interrelated historical groups. My remarks are therefore necessarily general – and this may be their weakness: their strength rests on the systematic methods used to generate a sample of films for analysis[3] and on a scrupulous insistence on the correlation of data from disparate sources as the foundation for any proposition

A notable feature of popular cinema during this period, for example, is the striking change in the typical heroine. the transgressive adult woman portrayed by Margaret Lockwood in *The Wicked Lady* gave way by 1964 to the troubled child-woman played by Tippi Hedren in *Marnie*. But can this observation offer any insights about the evolution of gender politics in the postwar period, and how can we understand these representations to have been read by their contemporary audiences? Not only were the internal

3 The annual assessments of 'popularity' published by three different sources – the British fan magazine *Picturegoer* the British trade paper *KW* the American trade paper *Motion Picture Herald* – were correlated only films which appeared in two or more out of six possible citation categories being considered popular' for the purpose of my sample A table showing the full list of these titles appears on pp 258–9 below

features, as it were, of popular films, subject to change: the context of the cinematic institution itself altered dramatically between 1945 and 1960 Billings's ebullient optimism, in his review of 1946 –

> More than anything else the Box-Office balance sheet of 1946 shows that this has been the best year on record for the British film industry Of the estimated yearly takings of £110,000,000, contributed by the 25,000,000 British filmgoers who regularly attend their 'local', a substantial sum is now 'stopping at home'. This is good news.[4]

4 *KW*, 19 December 1946 p 46

– had by 1960 given way to a more circumspect tone:

> Let's face it, 1960 hasn't exactly been a vintage film year, but what it lacked in quality it gained in variety. Moreover it was a comparatively prosperous year and for these reasons: one, the lifting of the Entertainments Tax, which has made a tremendous difference to gross takings in West End and key provincial halls; two, the aforementioned variety of the pictures, particularly those made by British producers, who have again stolen a march on the Yanks; and three, the masses' growing discontent with television programmes. They not only want a change of fare, but an excuse to retire from the parlour.[5]

5 *KW* 15 December 1960, p 8

Over these fifteen years, the 'struggle' between the trade itself and the film critics responsible, through their reviews, for the discourse surrounding films, was conducted against a background of major social changes: postwar austerity and reconstruction gave way to the consumer boom and apparently increased affluence of the fifties, of which one feature was the widening of leisure choices and the overall decline of cinema as the dominant cultural form In this context it is legitimate to ask what 'the popular' connotes, and whether indeed it is possible to discover what was widely enjoyed at various moments.

The fan magazine *Picturegoer* carried out an annual poll of its readers and awarded its 'gold medal' to the most popular male and female actors in respect of their performance in a particular film, they also published the top ten names in each category yielded by their poll. From the 1930s until 1958, when the magazine ceased publication, the *Picturegoer* poll provides a consistent and useful summary of audience preferences, albeit confined to those cinemagoers who regularly subscribed to the magazine. On its own, this would be an inadequate guarantor of the contemporary success of individual actors or films; but it does offer a useful corrective to film distributors' annual assessments, which were more directly concerned with the profitability of films or the future market potential of stars

The most frequently quoted distributors' assessment is that published in the *Motion Picture Almanac*: this was an American

publication summarizing the activities of the US film industry at home and abroad, in which a simple list of the ten most popular films and stars at the British box office during the preceding year was given, apparently based on returns from distributors in Britain and presumably intended for the benefit of the US industry. The entry for the British box office occupies less than one of the one thousand pages in the publication. This is nevertheless a useful – and relatively accessible – rough guide to the dominant trends in popular cinema; though what it offers is limited by its derivation from the experience of distributors routinely dealing with the US industry (if not owned by US interests) and by its address primarily to interests which were in direct, and often bitter, competition with the British film industry during the period.

The periodic evaluations conducted within industry trade papers such as *KW* and *Motion Picture Herald* were addressed to those involved in the business of selling films to audiences, and accordingly aimed to inform their readers about the degree of success achieved by various products For the historian, the problem in dealing with these assessments lies in their inconsistency and variety and, most difficult of all, in the lack of information about how given judgements were formed. *Kinematograph Weekly*, the major British trade paper during the period, used over forty different categories in its assessments published in December each year: only four of these, however, appeared consistently. Several factors account for the lack of simple data about box-office receipts for particular films, and for the often eccentric proliferation of categories in *KW*'s annual awards.

During the latter part of the 1940s, cinema was undoubtedly the dominant form of popular culture in the UK, and seemed, to optimists at any rate, to be an expanding industry. Economic relations between Britain and the dominant US film industry in the austere postwar years were complicated by the British government's sporadic and ill-judged attempts to protect the home industry. Plotting the fiscal performance of individual products must have been an accountant's nightmare, and this, combined with the hope that the market would become more buoyant, might explain the lack of reliable data. But cinema audiences peaked in Britain in the late 1940s, with 1600 million admissions per year, thereafter declining continuously through the 1950s, the most dramatic fall occurring between 1955 (1182 million) and 1960 (501 million).[6] By 1965 they were down to 327 million; and the relentless fall continued, until by the late 1980s cinema admissions were a mere five per cent of what they had been in 1946.[7] Therefore, while the British economy as a whole appeared healthier during the consumer boom of the 1950s, the cinema industry had no respite. The major competitor in the field of entertainment was, of course, broadcast television, and references to this competition litter the

6 James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History* (London Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1983), p 372

7 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith On history and the cinema *Screen* vol 31 no 2 (1990), pp 160–71

cinema trade papers throughout the 1950s.

A correlation of films and stars cited in varied sources can offer a more trustworthy picture of 'popularity', at least in its quantitative dimension, than can dependence on any one source alone. A discussion of individual films selected according to such a correlation offers interesting historical insights to set alongside those available in studies whose *raisons d'être* and starting points are more firmly located in questions about particular genres, directors, stars or production strategies The problem with studies of the latter sort has always been their tendency to overemphasize film texts whose actual exposure to the mass audience was relatively marginal, because of their intrinsic interest for critics and scholars This overemphasis, and the concomitant marginalization of films which might have enjoyed greater success at the box office, becomes problematic to the degree that the canons by which critics and scholars have evaluated films are different from those by which it is legitimate to understand either the predilections or the 'reading activities' of the mass audience.

The vicissitudes of the various branches of the film industry are germane to a discussion of popularity because these relate to both the number and the types of films offered to audiences. As far as audiences themselves are concerned, we might speculate that although cinemas had substantially diminished in number by the mid 1960s while typical admission prices had risen appreciably, the overall range of leisure choices open to audience members had not changed as much as these facts might imply. Going to the cinema, from the 1960s onwards, was just one amongst a range of entertainment options. What this qualitative social change does suggest, however, is that the concept of popularity in relation to cinema has a different meaning in the period after the sixties than it did in the forties. This must be taken into account in assessments of the social consequences of cinematic representations towards the end of the postwar period. Popular cinematic imagery was far less widely consumed in the sixties than it was in the forties; and it should also be remembered that correlations of various assessments of popularity in any given year are conducted against a background of overall and absolute decline in the popularity of the institution of cinema. The demise of the fan magazine in the late fifties is a reminder of this.

If the distinguishing feature of British society in the forties was a stoical collectivism, by the sixties there was instead an impatient fragmentation. Is there any evidence of this in the content of films achieving large-scale box-office success? It is certainly true to say that characteristic themes treated in popular films underwent marked changes through the period, and that at any given moment all of the most popular films tended to share some common concerns However, unless we are to subscribe to the idea that films in some

way reflect the society in which they circulate, understanding the significance of such changes is a complex matter. Given that the meanings of a film are the product of active negotiation between reader and film text operating within a discursive field constructed via the activities of the industry and its critics, how did audience members 'read' the images they were offered?

Here we are immediately plunged into the realm of speculation. Although the answer to this question can never be known, its determinants may be considered; for example by means of detailed analysis of box-office successes yielded through a correlation of different sources, considering not only overall narrative themes, structures and resolutions, but also details of representations of characters and the nuances of their relation to narrative development. So far, so good: but this only attends to the film itself. What of the audience? What forms of evidence are available here? It is possible to envisage an oral history enquiry which would attempt to reconstruct, through interviews and questionnaires, some traces of the audience. But aside from the logistical difficulties of such an undertaking, any conclusions would be subject to all the limitations inherent in its methods: hindsight, faulty memory and unrepresentative samples of respondents, for example; though such conclusions would still offer fascinating correlative material along the lines of the Mass-Observation survey of cinema audiences in Bolton in 1938 [8] More satisfactory might be an examination of contemporary published material: if we cannot resurrect the audiences themselves, we do have access to discursive materials routinely circulating among them: in this form evidence does exist of the terms in which various films, characters, plots and stars were discussed. We can discover which representations were acceptable, which were the subject of controversy. In short, if we cannot meet with the audience, we can reconstruct the discursive contexts of their cinemagoing and their readings of films

8 Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987)

Trade discourses

A cursory glance at the list of films popular at the British box office between 1945 and 1965 (see the table on pp. 258–9), compiled from a correlation of the sources outlined above, shows that overall the British market was dominated by the US (Hollywood) product[9] – which explains the anxieties of the British industry concerning what they perceived as major threats to their livelihood: US 'investment' in British films, and the perennial competition with the US industry for box-office revenue In the late forties the share was more even, and the continuing success of Hollywood films with British audiences was masked by the fact that the smaller number of top box-office hits was dominated by British titles hence the celebration, in many

9 The table lists 105 US and 101 British films Only titles with a 'score' of 2 or more have been included here The remainder with 1 citation each is heavily dominated by the US product – thus the picture overall shows the British industry dominated by US imports In addition many of the British pictures were financed by US companies

histories of cinema, of British film production at this time. During the fifties, however, the US product was dominant, both in numbers of popular successes and within the handful of top selling titles in each year Towards the end of the fifties and in the early sixties, British films once again figure significantly both in overall market share and in the top hits listings – though given the contribution of US finance to these productions we should perhaps be wary of the claims about the 'revival' of the British cinema abounding in the press of the period: if the term is justified in cultural terms, it is certainly questionable in fiscal terms. By the mid 1960s, in any case, the situation was back to 'normal'· a market dominated by imported material, with a nonetheless significant minority of popular box-office successes emerging from the home industry.

Kinematograph Weekly was the main forum for the distribution and exhibition branches of the British industry. Josh Billings's annual review was clearly intended as a kind of survey of work in progress addressed to distributors and exhibitors. His references to the conditions in which the work was carried out – 'in spite of rain, snow, slush, fuel cuts, unprecedented months of sunshine and the chaotic economic conditions of 1947 . '[10] – allude to the shared experiences of exhibitors, as does his assessment of the value of the review to the trade:

10 *KW* 18 December 1947 p 18

> Originally the 'Kine Review of the Year' was called the 'Kine Book of Form', but when the survey caught on and renter and exhibitor alike found it provocative and stimulating, even if they did not always agree with the findings, it was decided to adopt a more dignified title. Nevertheless, there is a strong analogy between 'the review' and 'the racing manual'. Both cover twelve months and assess value on performance.[11]

11 *KW* 20 December 1951 p 9

Billings's analogy with the uncertainties of the racecourse and his reference to 'dignity' show how chancy the business was perceived to be by those engaged in it, and also that, the impatience of some film critics notwithstanding, there was no question for distributors and exhibitors about where cinema should be placed on the art-industry axis. 'art and the box office are seldom synonymous' [12]

12 *KW* 18 December 1952 p 146

The function of Billings's annual reviews, besides reinforcing the industry's sense of collectivity, was to attempt predictions of future performance in order to ensure profits, and hence survival This attempt would have had implications for the range of titles available to audiences in succeeding years, for it is distributors and exhibitors who make the initial selections from which audience choice produces the box-office hit Thus the politics of distribution, after those of production, constrain and order the very possibility of any particular film becoming a box-office hit. The large number – over forty in all – of different and changing categories employed during the period provides evidence of the industry's unease. attention to the details of

these categories, to the day-to-day terminologies of product classification, allows the historian insight into the various attempts to stabilize it It also allows consideration of the rather more elusive question of what a 'popular' film meant, in the terms of the trade, and how this meaning was subject to change as cinema audiences declined through the fifties. These categories fall into three distinct groups: those directly concerning the all-important issue of monies received; those responding to the imperative to define the product as closely as possible; and those concerning the box-office drawing power of particular performers.

Of these, the latter group is the most stable: the importance of actors to the marketing of films and the subsequent assessment of their success was apparently uncontested. Three categories citing an actor's name in respect of a particular film appeared consistently throughout the period 'Best Individual Performance', 'Most Popular and Consistent Star', and 'Most Promising Newcomer' 'Best Individual Performance' is the category for which Billings appears to draw most heavily on conventional notions of quality: on the values of 'art' as opposed to the more quantitative values – those of 'commerce' – implied in his use of the term 'popularity', where he habitually referred to the numbers of tickets sold, the length of queues or the perceived demand for films featuring a particular performer.

In the 'Most Promising Newcomer' category he signalled, for the benefit of his trade readership, a name which had the potential to become either a 'Best Performer' or a 'Most Popular and Consistent Star' or, in the best of all possible worlds, both. Billings's reference to James Dean, in the annual awards which followed the actor's untimely death, is illuminating in this respect. In December 1955 he wrote:

> I've not mentioned James Dean, lead in *East of Eden* (Warner–CinemaScope), among the newcomers, because his career was tragically nipped in the bud. As a matter of fact, I'm always chary of boosting fledglings because so few manage to spread their wings and make the top flight.[13]

13 *KW* 15 December 1955

Thus, despite Dean's well-received performance and his evident potential as a box-office draw, Billings did not list him along with Brigitte Bardot, Diane Cilento and Paul Scofield in his choice of 'Most Promising Newcomers' for 1955: since Dean's future was already past, such a mention would have been of no use to the distribution branch of the industry. During the 1945–60 period the number of citations for 'Best Performance' increased: perhaps the decline in overall audience figures made the assessment of an individual star's popularity increasingly uncertain, throwing Billings back on his experience in recognizing performance skills to estimate

future popularity. In 1957 he commented on the changes he perceived:

> As for the giants of yesterday, Bob Hope, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable and Fred Astaire, they seem to be as dead as the dodo. The Tommy Steeles, the Frankie Vaughans and the Elvis Presleys have completely taken over their territory [14]

14 *KW*, 12 December 1957, p 9

In 1946 Billings cited only one actor in his category 'Best Individual Performer' – Celia Johnson for her performance in *Brief Encounter* In 1951 he listed Michael Redgrave in *The Browning Version*, Alec Guinness in *The Mudlark*, Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday* and Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, referring in particular to Redgrave's 'superlative straight acting', his 'gentle tour de force'. By 1957 the number of 'Best Performances' had risen to ten.[15] However, although Billings did occasionally refer to individual performance in his prose accompaniment to the annual review, this practice was on the whole unusual. Most of his text is concerned with an assessment of distributors' output and with the contours of the successful film. Again and again he stressed that individual performance, stars, technological innovations and the like can never compensate for a poor script:

15 They were Heather Sears in *The Story of Esther Costello* Yvonne Mitchell in *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, Ingrid Bergman and Yul Brynner in *Anastasia* Deborah Kerr in *Tea and Sympathy* Carroll Baker in *Baby Doll*, Richard Todd in *Yangtse Incident*, Andy Griffith in *A Face in the Crowd*, Ben Gazzara in *End as a Man* and Anthony Perkins in *Fear Strikes Out*

> The wide-screen and colour can unquestionably make a good film even more attractive, but, like many a so-called star, these embellishments are no compensation for an indifferent script. There never has been and there never will be a substitute for a strong story [16]

16 *KW* 12 December 1957 p 9

As far as individual actors are concerned, Billings was undoubtedly most at ease with the category 'Most Popular Stars', though it is interesting to note the relatively poor correlation between his assessment of who these were and that of *Picturegoer*'s annual readership poll. *Picturegoer* cited ten male and ten female actors each year in its annual 'Best Actor' and 'Best Actress' awards, whereas Billings was more erratic, giving forty-three names in 1948 and only five in 1953 and 1959 In general the number was between ten and twenty-five The correlation between these and the *Picturegoer* assessments was never more than fifty per cent, and frequently much less In 1946, when Billings cited Celia Johnson for 'Best Individual Performance', he was actually far more enthusiastic about James Mason and Margaret Lockwood, who were among *KW*'s sixteen 'Most Popular and Consistent Stars':

> We have no hesitation in placing James Mason first Although he has only appeared in one film this year, *The Wicked Lady*, his popularity has enormously increased. Evidence of this is the constant demand for his old films and the furore he has created in the States He is clever enough to keep in the news, without

making too many pictures. The studio which eventually gets him – and may it be British – will definitely be on velvet

Margaret Lockwood, of *The Wicked Lady* and *Bedelia* fame, is easily Britain's Number One feminine star.[17]

17 *KW* 19 December 1946 p 47

In 1951 he cited seventeen names, only four of which also figured in *Picturegoer*'s list – Alec Guinness, Susan Hayward, Doris Day and Glynis Johns; and in 1957 there were twenty-three, of which seven also appeared in the *Picturegoer* assessments.[18] Despite his regular attention to actors, however, by the late fifties Billings clearly had reservations about the scope of their power at the box office·

18 These were Dirk Bogarde Frank Sinatra Richard Todd Heather Sears, Yvonne Mitchell, Ingrid Bergman and Deborah Kerr

I've mentioned who I believe to be the most popular stars, but, with the exception of Kenneth More, who is unquestionably a big draw here, I know of no actor who can turn an ordinary film into a box office success mainly on the strength of his name.[19]

19 *KW*, 12 December 1957 p 9

The category 'Most Popular British Star' appeared only once, in 1945. 'Most Popular and Consistent Young Star' appeared in 1945[20] and in 1954–5.[21] Although it is clear both from film reviews and from letters from fans published in the two fanzines of the period, *Picturegoer* and *Pictureshow*, that stars were often identified with particular film genres, there is no reference to this aspect of their performances in the annual popularity assessments, except in the case of comedians. The category 'Most Successful Comedy Team' appeared in 1945 and in the first part of the fifties (Abbott and Costello received this honour in 1951, thereafter until 1956 Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis); 'Most Popular Comedian' appeared once in 1959 (this was Norman Wisdom, 'unchallengeably Britain's leading clown'[22]). The presence of these categories and the absence of comedy as a generic category in the product classifications until the sixties, except for one appearance in 1948,[23] a most troubled year for the industry, suggests that comedy – perennially popular, as the lists of top box-office films shows – was perceived either as the product of stars rather than of writers or directors; or as a more inclusive type of category than other generic descriptions. Thus a western or a musical might also be a comedy, but it would be the western or musical attributes of the film which would determine its classification.

20 This was Margaret O Brien

21 Vincent Winter in 1954 Jonathon Ashmore, Colin Gibson Lesley Dudley and Peter Asher in 1955 were referred to as 'Most Promising Youngsters'

22 *KW* 17 December 1959 p 160

23 'That sublime rib tickler' *Sitting Pretty* according to Billings one of the cleverest and funniest comedies ever made (*KW*, 16 December 1948, p 16)

KW's product classifications are far less stable than those concerning actors, revealing the increasingly desperate atempts to stem the inexorable decline in cinema admissions through the period. In general the picture is one of a disappearance of categories at the end of the forties, some rather odd experiments in the early fifties and an appearance of new categories towards the end of that decade. The generic categories are the largest group, and within these the *musical* is the most consistently used (1945–7, 1949–58) The *western* first appeared as a separate category in the postwar

review in 1950 when *Winchester 73* was cited as 'Best Western'; and this category was used throughout the fifties, except in 1954 when the rather curious 'Best Outdoor Film' described *The Far Country*. In the late 1940s the categories *documentary*, *interest* and *artistic* were used: in 1948, for example, *XIV Olympiad – The Glory of Sport* was named 'Best Full Length Documentary', *This Modern Age* 'Best Interest Series', and *Hamlet* the 'Most Artistic Film' However, none of these categories survived beyond 1950. In 1958, a new category, *horror*, made its first appearance (referring to the Hammer production *Dracula*), and was joined in 1959 by 'Best Series', which confirmed the box-office drawing power of the 'Carry On' films *Carry on Sergeant*, the first of the series, had appeared in Billings's list of 'Others in the Money' in 1958, and *Carry on Nurse* was *KW*'s 'Biggest Box Office Attraction' in 1959. Yet in 1954 and 1955, when the first two 'Doctor' films, *Doctor in the House* and *Doctor at Sea* were among the box-office hits, there was no category designating films from a series. This category seems to be a hybrid between a generic classification and one which attends, like 'Best Straight X Certificate' (*Room at the Top* in 1959 and *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1960), 'Best Offbeat' (*The Shaggy Dog* in 1959) and 'Best Gimmick' (*House on Haunted Hill* in 1959) to features of the film understandable in terms not of narrative content so much as potential marketing strategies. The only categories which, in attempting to define both content and mode of address, can unarguably be called generic, and which were routinely used during the fifties, were the musical and the western It was not until the sixties that greater precision was attempted in generic definitions employed: 'Best Thriller' (*The Birds* in 1963), 'Best Historical Drama' (*Zulu* in 1964), 'Best Costume Comedy' (*Tom Jones* in 1963), and so on, indicating – in their appeal to specialized audience preferences – the increasing fragmentation of the cinema audience which characterized that decade

In the mid 1950s two shortlived categories attended specifically to new technologies in the production and exhibition of films; 'Best 3-D' (*House of Wax* in 1953 and *Hondo* in 1954) and 'Biggest CinemaScope Attraction' (*The Robe* and *Three Coins in the Fountain* in 1954, *There's No Business Like Show Business* and *The Seven Year Itch* in 1955, *The King and I*[24] and *Smiley* in 1956, and *Island in the Sun* and *Anastasia* in 1957) CinemaScope and 3-D can best be understood as attempts to draw audiences into the cinema by promising them a form of entertainment unavailable on the domestic television screen The presence of these categories in the mid fifties also draws attention to the fact that many cinemas were not yet equipped to screen CinemaScope films, and that such films might thus have required extra encouragement By making a special case in this way, Billings and *KW* perhaps hoped to encourage investment in this new technology.

24 This film was also cited as 'Best Musical'

Finally, within these product definitions, some attention was paid to the nationality of origin of films. Here the chauvinism of the British is strikingly evident, all films being classified as either 'British', 'American' or 'Continental'. The category 'Best British Film' was, as would be expected in the British market, the most consistent; but even so it did not appear every year, being most in evidence at the beginning of the period (1945–51, 1953, 1957). The category 'Best American Film' appeared, rather oddly, at just the time in the mid 1950s when the US product had achieved its maximum dominance of the British market (1954–6, 1960). The category 'Most Successful Continental Film' appeared in the early fifties and was fairly consistently used thereafter (1952–8, 1960). In 1952 *La Ronde* (Ophuls, France, 1950) was the first 'Most Successful Continental Film', followed in 1953 by the compendium film *The Seven Deadly Sins* (de Filipo and others, France/Italy, 1952), in 1954 by *The Wages of Fear* (Clouzot, France/Italy, 1953), in 1955 with *Ulysses* (Camerini, Italy, 1954), in 1956 with *The Light Across the Street* (Lacombe, France, 1955), and in 1957 with . *And Woman Was Created* (Vadim, France, 1956) In 1958 Billings called this category 'Most Successful Continental Gimmick Film', naming *Isle of Levant* (Kunz, Switzerland, 1957) and *Femmes de Paris* (Loubignac, France, 1954). In 1959 there was a 'Gimmick' category, and one for 'Straight X-Certificate', but none for 'Continental'; and in 1960 non-English-language films were referred to simply as 'Foreign', though the implications of the *risqué* were retained – thus the 'Most Sensational Foreign Film' in 1960 was *The Green Mare's Nest* (Autant-Lara, France/Italy, 1960). Billings returned to the appellation 'Continental' during the sixties.

Apart from its chauvinist lumping together of all non-English-language films, this is a particularly interesting category, since few 'Continental' films achieved the status of box-office hits, certainly earlier in the period; yet they did offer a new marketing possibility, and can perhaps best be understood in this way. They were invariably European films, mainly French and Italian, and so perhaps the use of this category also offers early evidence of the industry keeping half an eye on Europe as an economic entity. On the whole, however, it is true to say that in the routine parlance of the trade papers and fanzines of the period the term continental implied the sexually explicit; and as such offered a product, like 3-D or CinemaScope, unavailable on the domestic screen. Billings's closing remarks in his 1958 summary revealed his awareness of the implications of his categories – particularly with reference to cinema's competition for audiences with broadcast television·

> Continental films, it will be observed, have steadily grown in popularity, but sex, partly expressed in nudity, is still the main gimmick Very few U certificate 'foreigners' have broken records

The so-called horrific menace is nothing to get alarmed about. Dracula and Frankenstein, like our poor relations, will always be with us, but unlike them they can be depended on to support themselves and put a bit by. Chillers are as important a part of screen fare as the other extreme, slapstick.

CinemaScope, VistaVision, Technirama and colour were freely used during the last 12 months. Personally, I'm all for these 'gimmicks' because they give stature to a film, and make TV look small

And so ends the box-office chronicle of 1958. What does it reveal? The fascinating and glorious uncertainty of film business![25]

[25] *KW* 18 December 1958, p 8

The 'glorious uncertainties' of the business in the period between 1945 and 1960, and the concomitant innovations in marketing strategies of the late fifties, are also in evidence in the third group of categories, those relating to the primary function of film as perceived by exhibitors and distributors – namely to generate profit at the box office. The categories which appeared consistently throughout the period were 'Biggest Box Office Attraction', with a separate listing of 'Runners-Up', and 'Best Output', which cited a distribution company These were the two most important items of information for exhibitors which films made the most money, and which distribution company routinely offered the best booking opportunities There was considerable attention, most marked in the late forties, to specifically British operations; and during the fifties attention was paid to novel marketing strategies with such categories as 'Best Double Bill', 'Best British Double Bill', 'Best Re-Issue Double Bill' (1951, 1953–60), or the colourfully named 'Super Special Long Run Propositions at Special Prices' (1958) and 'Hard Ticket Giants', 'Block Busting Exploitation Offerings' (1959–60), which, like 3-D and CinemaScope in the earlier fifties, drew attention to films which could not be fairly accounted for in the overall national box-office picture. The 'Super Special Propositions' in 1958 were *The Ten Commandments*, *South Pacific* and *Around The World in 80 Days*; and the same titles reappear as 'Hard Ticket Giants' in 1959, accompanied by *Gigi* and *The Nun's Story*. In 1960 the term was 'Block Busting Exploitation', and the film was *Hercules Unchained*. Billings's remarks about the latter are interesting both for their insight into contemporary marketing practices and for their clear separation between the 'good' (the well made, engaging film) and the 'good' (the health of the industry):

> The fabulous spectacle starring Steve Reeves was exploited in this country by Joe Levine who wears Barnum's cloak with astonishing and brilliant aplomb, and his skilfully timed saturation campaign in newspapers and magazines and on TV paid off and showed that box office success can be bought. There is of course a tendency to condemn pressurised salesmanship, but don't let us be pompous

Most Popular Films at the British Box Office 1945–1960

1945
Madonna of the Seven Moons (UK) 5*
Mr Skeffington (US) 4
The Seventh Veil (UK) 5
Henry V (UK) 2
The Way to the Stars (UK) 2
A Song to Remember (US) 2
Valley of Decision (US) 3
The Affairs of Susan (US) 3
I Live in Grosvenor Square (UK) 2
Old Acquaintance (US) 2
Frenchman's Creek (US) 2
Mrs Parkington (US) 2
Here Come the Waves (US) 2
They Were Sisters (UK) 3
Perfect Strangers (UK) 2
Conflict (US) 2
Duffy's Tavern (US) 2
A Place of One's Own (UK) 2

1946
The Wicked Lady (UK) 5
The Corn is Green (US) 4
Piccadilly Incident (UK) 4
Caesar and Cleopatra (UK) 4
Brief Encounter (UK) 4
Spellbound (US) 3
The Captive Heart (UK) 2
The Bells of St Mary's (US) 3
Mildred Pierce (US) 2
Leave Her to Heaven (US) 2
Road to Utopia (US) 3
Kitty (US) 2
Caravan (UK) 2
Blue Dahlia (US) 2
Bedelia (UK) 2
O S S (US) 2

1947
Great Expectations (UK) 5
Odd Man Out (UK) 4
The Courtneys of Curzon Street (UK) 4
The Jolson Story (US) 3
Deception (US) 2
They Made Me a Fugitive (UK) 2
The Razor's Edge (US) 2
Frieda (UK) 3
Black Narcissus (UK) 3
Duel in the Sun (US) 2
So Well Remembered (UK) 2
October Man (UK) 2
The Upturned Glass (UK) 2
Two Mrs Carrolls (US) 2

1948
Spring in Park Lane (UK) 5
Oliver Twist (UK) 5
The Red Shoes (UK) 5
Miranda (UK) 5
Hamlet (UK) 4
The Winslow Boy (UK) 2
My Brother Jonathan (UK) 2
The Fallen Idol (UK) 2
Saigon (US) 2
The Best Years of our Lives (US) 3
I Remember Mama (US) 2
Homecoming (UK) 2
It Always Rains on Sunday (UK) 3
Road to Rio (US) 2
An Ideal Husband (UK) 2
Green Dolphin Street (US) 2
Forever Amber (US) 2
Life With Father (US) 3
The Weaker Sex (UK) 2
If Winter Comes (US) 2

1949
Maytime in Mayfair (UK) 5
Johnny Belinda (US) 3
Whispering Smith (US) 2
Jolson Sings Again (US) 3
Scott of the Antarctic (UK) 3
Red River (US) 2
Madness of the Heart (UK) 2
Adam and Evelyne (UK) 2
The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (US) 2
Paleface (US) 2
The Blue Lagoon (UK) 2
Easter Parade (US) 3
The Barkleys of Broadway (US) 2
Three Came Home (US) 2
The Forsyte Saga (US) 2

1950
Odette (UK) 5
Annie Get Your Gun (US) 5
Father of the Bride (US) 3
Sunset Boulevard (US) 2
Morning Departure (UK) 2
The Wooden Horse (UK) 3
Samson and Delilah (US) 4
Pandora and the Flying Dutchman (UK) 2
All About Eve (US) 4
The Blue Lamp (UK) 2
The Happiest Days of Your Life (UK) 2
Treasure Island (UK) 2
Fancy Pants (US) 2

1951
The Lavender Hill Mob (UK) 2
The Great Caruso (US) 4
Born Yesterday (US) 2
The Browning Version (UK) 2
No Highway (UK) 2
The Lady with the Lamp (UK) 2
Encore (UK) 2
Detective Story (US) 2
Captain Horatio Hornblower (UK) 4
White Corridors (UK) 2
Laughter in Paradise (UK) 2
Worm's Eye View (UK) 2
Cinderella (US) 2

King Solomon's Mines (US) 2
The Mudlark (UK) 2
Scrooge (UK) 2

1952
The African Queen (UK) 4
The Sound Barrier (UK) 4
The Greatest Show on Earth (US) 3
The Planter's Wife (UK) 3
A Streetcar Named Desire (US) 2
Where No Vultures Fly (UK) 2
The Quiet Man (US) 2
Ivanhoe (UK) 2
Angels One Five (UK) 2
Reluctant Heroes (UK) 2
Mandy (UK) 3

1953
The Cruel Sea (UK) 4
Shane (US) 2
Roman Holiday (US) 2
Moulin Rouge (UK) 3
Quo Vadis (US) 2
Limelight (US) 2
Come Back Little Sheba (US) 2
The Snows of Kilimanjaro (US) 2
Genevieve (UK) 2
Call Me Madam (US) 2
A Queen is Crowned (UK) 2
Road to Bali (US) 2

1954
The Glenn Miller Story (US) 5
Calamity Jane (US) 4
The Purple Plain (UK) 3
On The Waterfront (US) 3
Magnificent Obsession (US) 2
The Caine Mutiny (US) 3
Doctor in the House (UK) 3
The Robe (US) 2
Hobson's Choice (UK) 3
Sabrina Fair (US) 2
Rear Window (US) 2
Trouble in Store (UK) 2
The Belles of St Trinians (UK) 3
Knock on Wood (US) 2
From Here to Eternity (US) 3

1955
The Dam Busters (UK) 5
Doctor at Sea (UK) 3
Marty (US) 3
The Country Girl (US) 3
East of Eden (US) 2
A Man Called Peter (US) 2
All That Heaven Allows (US) 2
A Star is Born (US) 2
Love Me or Leave Me (US) 2
I Am a Camera (UK) 2
Young at Heart (US) 2
White Christmas (US) 2
One Good Turn (UK) 2
Raising a Riot (UK) 2
20 000 Leagues Under the Sea (US) 2

1956
Reach for the Sky (UK) 5
The King and I (US) 4
The Man with the Golden Arm (US) 2
Rebel Without a Cause (US) 2
It's Great to be Young (UK) 3
Guys and Dolls (US) 3
A Town Like Alice (UK) 2
The Man Who knew Too Much (US) 2
The Rose Tattoo (US) 2
Picnic (US) 2
Trapeze (US) 2
Private's Progress (UK) 2
The Baby and the Battleship (UK) 2
The Searchers (US) 2

1957**
Anastasia (US) 5
Doctor at Large (UK) 3
Yangtse Incident (UK) 3
Campbell's Kingdom (UK) 2
Giant (US) 3
The Teahouse of the August Moon (US) 2
The Spanish Gardener (UK) 2
The Story of Esther Costello (UK) 2
Woman in a Dressing Gown (UK) 2
Heaven Knows, Mr Allison (US) 2
High Society (US) 2
Tea and Sympathy (US) 2

1958**
The Wind Cannot Read (UK) 3
The Bridge on the River Kwai (UK) 3
The Young Lions (US) 2
Pal Joey (US) 2
Indiscreet (UK) 2
The Defiant Ones (US) 2
Carve Her Name With Pride (UK) 2
Ice Cold in Alex (UK) 2
Peyton Place (US) 2

1959**
Room at the Top (UK) 2
***
The Inn of the Sixth Happiness (UK) 2
I'm All Right Jack (UK) 2

1960 **
Sink the Bismarck (UK) 2
***
The Millionairess (UK) 2
Inherit the Wind (US) 3

Films analysed in detail are given in italics
* The 'score' figure given for each film refers to the number of mentions it received in the following annual award categories *Picturegoer* 'Best Actor', *Picturegoer* 'Best Actress', *Kinematograph Weekly* 'Top Box Office Film', *Kinematograph Weekly* 'Best Individual Performance', *Kinematograph Weekly* 'Most Popular Star', *Motion Picture Herald* 'Top Ten Films'
** There are no *Motion Picture Herald* citations for the British Box Office in this year
*** There are no *Picturegoer* awards for this year

Hercules Unchained was, admittedly, not half as good as it was cracked up to be by Joe Levine, but it went out during the August holidays and helped by a U-certificate and inclement weather brought into the cinema many young children who had never seen 'the flicks'.

The experience unquestionably gave them a taste for hokum but as their education advances there is no reason why they shouldn't acquire a liking for really first class films and become regular picturegoers.[26]

[26] *KW* 15 December 1960 pp 8–9

Although most of these titles attracted considerable razzmatazz and long queues in urban centres, none appeared in the 'Biggest Box Office Attraction' listings: these categories, then, appear to embody a suggestion to exhibitors about new strategies for filling (or saving) their cinemas. By the end of the fifties it had become inescapably clear that cinema was no longer the dominant form of mass entertainment, and that in order to survive at all outside the 'art house' it would have to reorganize itself radically. These raucous categories represent an attempt to do this; and the films themselves, with their lavish production values and grand-scale panoramas, recall the struggles in the USA between the MPPC cartel and the 'independents' in the early years of the century, as the cinema institution engaged in a formative contortion similar to that which was to characterize the late 1950s.

In this exploration of the changing meanings of the notion of 'the popular' as it referred to the relation between films and their audiences (a relation always mediated by the box office, the object of Billings's and *KW*'s scrutiny), it is the category which measures successive films' drawing power at the box office which is of greatest interest. In the succession of 'Biggest Box Office Attractions' between 1945 and 1960, there is evidence of the gradual shift in audience preferences: for *KW* 'the popular' is simply that which the most people prefer and will pay to see Any sociologically motivated interpretation of such preferences, though, must also take into account the overall and absolute decline in audiences during the period and the related politics of distribution.

Popular themes

The simultaneous popularity of different genres and stars, not to mention the vagaries of release dates, make it difficult to claim with certainty that any single film was the 'top hit' of its year Nevertheless this correlative method is sound enough to offer groups of titles which, taken together, can be analysed to reveal common themes. Discovering thematic unities amongst groups of films whose

only common feature, at first glance, is a temporal one, requires an analytic method which can be employed over a range of different genres. I selected (on the basis of their 'popularity' at the British box office) groups of six films from 1945–6, 1950–1, and 1955–6, and performed a careful textual analysis of each film. These analyses involved a dual enquiry into the status and narrative experience of characters, taking into account firstly their functional contribution to the unfolding of the narrative, and secondly the degree to which the character allowed (or invited) audience insight into the diegesis. This method entailed a schema whereby all characters in any film could be classified in one of four groups (central, major, minor, figures), and the schema allowed comparisons between films contemporary with each other, and between films separated by a temporal interval. Having analysed each film in isolation according to this method, I was then in a position to consider individual films and groups of films in terms of thematic and structural similarities and dissimilarities. In this approach in which film texts are privileged, dictating questions or observations about their social and/or political contexts, I hope to have avoided the pitfalls of a reflectionist analysis. The elaborate correlation of sources employed to generate sample films for analysis is fundamental to this mode of enquiry, since it is contemporary success at the box office, or contemporary audience choice, which determines the selection of film objects in the first place and therefore allows the following question: what changes are discernible in the content and narrative structure of films found to be 'popular' at different moments?

In the mid 1940s a common theme in the majority of the most successful films at the box office concerned the status and behaviour of women Time and again, films offered a central female protagonist who transgressed the implied social order either wilfully, as Barbara (Margaret Lockwood) did in *The Wicked Lady*, or as a consequence of 'tragic' circumstances, such as those suffered by Diana (Anna Neagle) in *Piccadilly Incident* (1946). Frequently, the films focused on the psychic makeup of the character in an attempt to explain her troubles by reference to her past experience Francesca (Ann Todd) in *The Seventh Veil* (1945) and Maddalena (Phyllis Calvert) in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) are examples of characters whose narrative path is constructed in this way. The case of Laura (Celia Johnson) in *Brief Encounter* is exemplary of this narrative method at its most uncompromising, since the entire film is structured in the form of her 'silent' – given in voice over to the audience alone – address to her husband, in which she details the agonies and delights of her extramarital liaison. The consequence of this narrative method is that problems which might, from a more distanced point of view, reasonably appear to be general social concerns – in this case the attempt at reestablishment of prewar conventions of family life following the disruptions of the

war period – are suggested to be the discrete and private concerns of a lone (female) individual. Even when the subject matter of the film does not overtly concern an individual heroine, there is a clear tendency for the thematics to be personalized in this way: in *The Bells of St Mary's* (1945), for example, the central enigma concerning the fate of the convent school is delineated primarily in terms of the developing relationship between the head teacher, Sister Mary Benedict (Ingrid Bergman), and the school's new padre Father O'Malley (Bing Crosby).

By the mid 1950s, by contrast, the thematics of popular films are concerned more with men than with women, with narrative structures tending to a generalization from the particular, as opposed to the 1940s personification of social – generally expressed as female – concerns. Here we have a mythologizing process at work: the narrative experience of central characters (by now usually male) exemplifies contemporary ideals, is idealized, rather than being relegated to the realm of the private where, whether tragic or fortunate, characters' experience is not inevitably seen in symbiotic relation with that of the wider social group

Thus the angst-laden performances of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *East of Eden* (1954) are made to stand for the general problem of socializing the young in middle-class America and, in the case of the latter, for an even more generalized interrogation of American values. Both films implicitly pose the question 'what is the American way of life?' exploring it through a dramatic construction in which the central character is posed as embodying wider concerns. This is true of such apparently diverse films as *Rebel Without a Cause*, *East of Eden* and *The Searchers* (1956), as well as of the British pictures *The Dam Busters* (1954), *Reach for the Sky* (1956) and *Doctor at Sea*, in which the question relates to Britain and the British way of life. The point which concerns us here is that all these films enjoyed outstanding success at the British box office in the mid 1950s In *The Dam Busters* the working rapport between Squadron Leader Gibson (Richard Todd) and Barnes Wallis (Michael Redgrave) is shown as exemplary of British inventiveness under pressure, similarly the story of Douglas Bader's spectacular overcoming of personal obstacles, enacted by Kenneth More in *Reach for the Sky*, is offered as equivalent, through the construction of the narrative, to the fighting spirit of the British as called for by Churchill in his wartime exhortations. Even in the comedy *Doctor at Sea*, follow up to the equally successful *Doctor in the House*, the central character of Dr Simon Sparrow (Dirk Bogarde) exemplifies, by his very reasonableness amid the cartoon-like characters with which the story is populated, the meritocratic ideal of fifties Britain.

Critical discourses

This major change in the thematics of 'the popular' over a ten-year period provokes further questions about the critical discourse surrounding these films My textual analyses were followed by collecting critical responses to the sample films from a variety of sources, both British and American trade journals, film journals, fan magazines, and national press and more general papers which sometimes reviewed, or referred to, new films [27] In general, the less specialized the source the more likely it was that a radically oversimplified reading of a film would be presented. Nevertheless, this set of sources remains, for the historian, the best contemporary evidence of audience understandings of the films. Clearly the caveat underlying my remarks about changes in the thematics of the popular – that only generalized propositions based on a plurality of instances have any validity – is also operative in the case of these published responses to films.

27 Such as *Picture Post*, *New Musical Express* (formerly *The Accordion Times*) and some women's magazines – *Woman*, *Woman's Illustrated Woman and Beauty Woman's Own*

What is immediately of interest here is that, rather than the striking change in the thematics of the popular noted in the films themselves, there appears to be a striking consistency: critics and reviewers seem to be virtually unanimous in the sociological and aesthetic models on which they implicitly draw in their summary judgements. Moreover these models, unlike the thematics of films, did not change appreciably between the mid 1940s and the mid 1950s. The majority of critics affirm, in their responses to films, the conventional status quo as typically confirmed in narrative resolutions, referring additionally to the canons of 'high' art as these were understood in postwar Britain[28] in their applause for a particular performance – Redgrave in *The Browning Version* and *The Dam Busters*, Johnson in *Brief Encounter* – or in their denigration of a particular film whose 'popular' tone reveals, to the critic, a lamentable absence of such an aesthetic. It is in practice often difficult to separate aesthetic references from those pertaining to social mores: this confusion between cultural and ethical values has, I suspect, substantive consequences for the maintenance of middle-class hegemony during the so-called 'classless' fifties. *Tribune* noted approvingly the 'Beautifully sincere and natural playing of Celia Johnson' in *Brief Encounter*, endorsing her eventual repudiation of the 'affair' with Alec (Trevor Howard) by referring to the 'guilt, humiliation and [a] heroic integrity at the centre' It is tempting to infer that Johnson's 'playing' could be considered 'natural' precisely *because* of her 'heroic integrity' revealed in her appropriately felt 'guilt and humiliation'. Margaret Lockwood's performance as the ebullient, unashamedly transgressive heroine in *The Wicked Lady* was, on the other hand, 'inept to the point of exasperation', though for this evidently misogynist critic, James Mason in the same film 'aroused both admiration and sympathy' [29]

28 John Ellis 'Art culture quality terms for a cinema in the forties and seventies *Screen* vol 19, no 3 (1978), pp 9–50

29 *Tribune* 23 November 1945

The implicit opposition between (high) drama and (low) melodrama which underlies reviews throughout the period surfaced clearly in the *News Chronicle* review of *The Dam Busters*:

> Drama . never once degenerates into melodrama, nor the humour into the irrelevant flippancy of comic relief.[30]

30 *News Chronicle* 17 May 1955

In addition, many reviews in the forties revealed an alignment between 'high art' values and French cinema, which had given way by the end of the fifties to a repudiation of the sexual explicitness of French (by now 'Continental') films. *Brief Encounter* was equated by many with both 'art' cinema and, in what seemed a self-evident corollary, 'French' cinema

> it would be difficult to find a more profound study of love outside the French cinema.
>
> this is a poet's film, harsh, cruel and lovely
>
> Four people remarked separately to me after its preview that *Brief Encounter* was more like a French film, finding about the highest praise they could for it.
>
> What they meant is that the film, among other things, is emotionally grown up . .
>
> It is because of this sincerity and its infallible evocation of Haute Suburbia that I rank this as the best of the Noel Coward/ David Lean/Havelock Allen/Ronald Neame productions, and forgive its disturbing patches of violent light relief [31]

31 *Britain Today* February 1946, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1945, *Chronicle*, 24 January 1946

We should also note, however, the context of these critical judgements. Since much of the British trade and critical press during the fifties was deeply concerned about the survival of the home industry, there is always an imperative in their writing to encourage – to search for indications, however insubstantial or tenuous, of future success, as well as to exhort audiences to attend. This tendency took a positively jingoistic turn as the decade progressed and the British industry crumbled before its critics' very eyes

Running through the shifting alliances and discords which characterized the British film industry from 1945 onwards there is a thread of agreement: an anxiety shared by all, though expressed and understood in implacably different ways, about the growing cultural dominance of Britain by the USA. Stafford Cripps at the Board of Trade in 1945, for example, saw the problem in terms of imports and exports: 'I am anxious', he said, 'to leave the strong Rank combine effective for meeting and possibly dealing with American competition.'[32] Whereas Ralph Bond, a leading member of the film technicians' union ACT, offered a rather different perception of the dual imperatives of Rank's export drive in the USA and his investment in distribution and exhibition in Britain:

32 Public Record Office Board of Trade 64/2188 (November 1945) quoted in Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State The Film Industry and the British Government 1927–84* (London British Film Institute, 1985), p 170

> It is a curious but evident fact that the more cinemas Mr Rank owns the more he is dependent on America to provide films to fill them.[33]

33 Ralph Bond *Monopoly the Future of British Films* (London ACT 1946) quoted in Dickinson and Street *Cinema and State* p 172

Lord Reith, appointed in April 1949 as the first chairman of the National Film Finance Corporation, the body set up to administer funds acquired through the Eady Levy, certainly felt his task to be at least as much a cultural as an industrial one.

> Let us be clear as to the issues at stake. . . . The most compelling are of the moral order – evidenced in the influence which the industry can exercise over so considerable a proportion of the population – interests, outlook and behaviour; in the projection of England and the English way of life to the Dominions and foreign countries, in the enhancement of the prestige and worth of England.[34]

34 Public Record Office, Board of Trade 64/4519 (February 1949) quoted in Dickinson and Street *Cinema and State* p 216

And Harold Wilson, then President of the Board of Trade, to whom this memorandum was addressed, had dealt with the point in more detail during a parliamentary debate on the film industry in June 1948:

> We are getting tired of some of the gangster, sadistic and psychological films of which we seem to have so many, of diseased minds, schizophrenia, amnesia and diseases which occupy so much of our screen time I should like to see more films which genuinely show our way of life, and I am not aware . . that amnesia and schizophrenia are stock parts of our social life.[35]

35 Hansard, 5th series, vol 452, column 775 17 June 1948 quoted in Charles Barr (ed) *All Our Yesterdays 90 Years of British Cinema* (London British Film Institute, 1986), p 14

The antipathy towards America which lurks beneath these remarks, as well as in the more specific responses to films by critics and reviewers, also surfaces as a thematic element in many British productions during the fifties, as well as in the implicit chauvinism of *KW*'s blithe division of the world into 'British', 'American' and 'Continental' in its annual review categories. A general sense that British cinema audiences were receiving a diet inappropriately dominated by Hollywood pervaded both critical writing and trade reviews, as well as informing the various governmental interventions in the regulation of the trade. British critics' alignment of the Hollywood film with the aesthetics of 'low'/mass/industrial culture and their attempts to find in the British film the values of 'high' culture can perhaps be understood as a solidly based suspicion of US infiltration of the UK market, couched in the terms of intellectual snobbery

An examination of *Kinematograph Weekly* through the fifties reveals, in addition to the perceived threat from American competition, an attention to the problem for the British industry of competition from broadcast television.[36] Apart from routine news coverage of the various negotiations conducted between industry

36 My remarks about television are both tentative and provisional – this is not an area which I have yet researched thoroughly

bodies and television companies, there are occasional feature articles which address the problem in general terms. An audience survey of 1956, for example, urged exhibitors to look to their laurels, and attempted to assert that television, while unarguably an alternative form of entertainment, was not necessarily a replacement for the cinema:

> If these figures represent a majority feeling, it is clear that, although television may result in some smaller attendances at the box office, the main thing that is keeping people away is unattractive programming [37]

37 *KW* 13 December 1956 pp 8-9

A few years earlier, in 1953, Josh Billings had gone even further. In the chatty prose accompanying his annual review, he referred to the extremely popular Rank Organisation documentary about the coronation, *A Queen is Crowned*:

> Every exhibitor who played the film, and most did, makes it his top. . . Rank Organisation deserves full credit for its foresight and courage in tackling the subject . . despite fears by many that the broadcasting and televising of the memorable ceremony would destroy the commercial potentialities of the celluloid impression. As it turned out the BBC recordings furnished the finest and most widely distributed trailer in the annals of show business. . [38]

38 *KW*, 17 December 1953 p 10

Despite Billings's optimism and the rather more circumspect findings of *KW*'s 1956 audience survey, however, there seems little doubt in retrospect about the deleterious effect the rise of broadcast television had on cinema audiences in Britain. The number of television licences issued rose from not quite 350,000 in 1950 to well over thirteen million in 1965.[39] In the same period, as we have seen, cinema lost over three quarters of its audience It was a spiralling decline: as admissions fell, cinemas closed and audiences dwindled Although the drop in overall revenue was less steep than that in audience numbers because of the rise in admission prices, gross revenue nevertheless declined by about half between the mid 1950s and the mid 1960s [40] In 1952 the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association attempted to institute a boycott against companies which sold films to television, but they were unable to prevent other trade associations from signing an agreement with the BBC in 1956 for the sale of films In that year, film culture made its appearance in BBC television programming with the Friday afternoon *Film Time* in which extracts, interviews and so on drew attention both to current releases and to the place of film in cultural history

39 Curran and Porter *British Cinema History* p 372

40 Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*, p 228

This coverage was soon expanded to include the Saturday night *Movie Museum*:

> The first in a new series of films which take the viewer back to the early days of the cinema. Tonight's edition includes that famous

pioneer of thrillers and adventure films *The Great Train Robbery* [41]

41 *Radio Times*, 7 January 1956

Here is evidence of an embryonic run through the standard canon of film history – Edwin S. Porter, D. W. Griffith, Mack Sennett, and so on. It is interesting to note that the routine screening of films on broadcast television, which began in 1956–7 with, among others, a transmission of John Ford's *Stagecoach* (on 29 September 1956), coincided with the sharpest fall in cinema admissions (from 1182 million in 1955 to 501 million in 1960). By 1958 the two television channels in Britain were between them broadcasting about a hundred and fifty films a year – an average of three every week

A case study

All these issues – the changes in the thematics of the popular between the mid 1940s and the mid 1950s, the consistent critical support for the conventional status quo (in sociological terms) and the routine dependence on the values of high art (in aesthetic terms); the increasing defensiveness on the part of the British industry and its critical support towards popular successes produced in Hollywood rather than Elstree – are condensed in the case of the 1951 George Cukor film, *Born Yesterday*. This film, released on the cusp of the new decade (its UK release date was 6 June 1951), was one of the top box-office hits of 1950–1. For the purposes of the present discussion, this film may be regarded as paradigmatic not only in its narrative structure but also in the tone of the responses it elicited from British reviewers.

Billie Dawn (Judy Holliday) is 'reborn' during the course of *Born Yesterday*'s narrative – but the (re)birth signalled in the film's title lays claim to a wider significance Like any heroine of the forties her transgressions must be remedied, like the central characters of fifties films her recoupment is achieved by means of her initiation into the twin ideals of high culture and democratic politics Thus, in the figure of Billie Dawn, American democracy is also born again freed, like her, from the corrupt and avaricious embrace of self-serving senators and entrepreneurs. In narrative terms she is moved from her initial position as consort to the grossly corrupt, but also culturally innocent, junk dealer Harry Brock (Broderick Crawford) to a new position at the narrative's close as wife to the literate, honest writer Paul Verrall (William Holden) The transformation is visually signalled through her dress, particularly via the motif of the spectacles through which she learns to 'see' the world with greater clarity (or at least to see it as it is seen by her journalist mentor/lover) This was a narrative resolution heartily approved of by the film's reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic·

Beneath the comedy, which is the picture's primary content, there is important meaning with respect to such matters as honesty, democratic principles, integrity and good citizenship.[42]

Garson Kanin's comedy is a pleasing lesson in the virtues of democracy, enlivened by smart, sometimes witty, dialogue and by characterisation which, if broad and simple, is always lively.[43]

42 *Motion Picture Herald*, 25 November 1950.

43 *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 18 (1951), p. 227.

In *Born Yesterday* Billie Dawn emerges from the 1940s as her conception of 'independence' is remodelled, as it were, to conform to the model required of women in the 1950s. Her complete renovation is indicated to the audience in the last scene of the film when, having been stopped for speeding along Capitol Hill, Paul inadvertently shows their brand new marriage licence, instead of his driving licence, to the traffic cop. In a closeup we see her new name, Emma Verrall. Emma was the name her father had given her, Verrall the name Paul has given her. Thus the prodigal daughter is reclaimed for patriarchal democracy, and the audience is left with the edifying conclusion that the 'good' Paul and Emma are set on their matrimonial path, while the 'bad' Harry and his corrupt lawyer Jim Deverey (Howard St John) must face the consequences of their illegal usurping of the democratic processes of lawmaking. As in many films of the later 1950s, the two central male characters Paul Verrall and Harry Brock epitomize the dualism – in this case offered as a polarization – in contemporary political values. Harry Brock (blind, like a badger?) the junk dealer, like Cal in *East of Eden*, is motivated by individualistic materialism while the goals of the journalist Paul Verrall (sees all?), like those of Cal's twin brother Aron, have more to do with the spiritual, with ideal social values. It is between these two figures that Billie Dawn must choose, which means that she must define herself in terms of one or the other.

Born Yesterday (Courtesy of Columbia Pictures Entertainment and BFI stills archive)

At various points in the film the significance of Billie's choice is signalled by the mise-en-scene in which the canons of western art are visually locked into the propositions of western democracy. We see an Egyptian obelisk in the distance between two pillars of the colonnade outside the National Gallery of Art, signifying the impressive longevity of history and culture (not to mention, for the feminist reader, their phallic dimensions); we see a small statue of Eros on a fountain, signifying the developing love between Billie and Paul; and, as Paul quotes for Billie a speech in which Napoleon claims that he would rather have been a humble peasant, we see Manet's *The Old Musician*, a painting about the choices that must be made by youth on the threshold of adult life, thus implicitly about the concept of free will. In this way the choice now available to Billie is signified, while at the same time the assertion is made that this choice is a consequence of her acculturation. This dimension of the film, however, seems to have been either missed or

ignored by British reviewers, who insisted on the absence of high art values in American popular cinema.

> Americans are easily bewitched by the word 'democracy' and a number of recent Broadway successes . have lightly and ingeniously expounded its simpler virtues. .
>
> Compared with her, Eliza Dolittle was a blue stocking and a mistress of phonetics . [44]

[44] *Sight and Sound* March 1951, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 April 1951

There is more to Billie, however, than a relatively simple *tabula rasa* being completed in a manner appropriate to the American myth Judy Holliday was an accomplished comedian and, in this role, played up the *ingénue* aspects of Billie's character so that Paul's earnestness is constantly put into question by her apparently naive, but often astute, questions and responses:

> Paul: Has he ever thought of anyone but himself?
> Billie: Who does?
> Paul: Millions of people do.
> The whole history of the world is the story of the struggle between the selfish and the unselfish . Can you understand that?
> Billie: You're crazy about me, aren't you?
> That's why you get so mad at Harry.
> Paul: Yes.

Thus the unanswered question about the nature of intelligence, an important theme of the film, is foregrounded in the interaction between Holliday's performance and her character's diegetic experience (the much celebrated card playing sequence is an earlier instance of this), and additionally, to the alert reader at least, she offers a powerful critique of the very process the narrative requires her to embrace. It is here that we can see at its clearest the collision between the strong heroine of the forties and the submissive supporting role typically allotted to women in films of the fifties In a film contemporary with *Born Yesterday*, *All About Eve*, Margot Channing (Bette Davis) summarizes the point

> One career all females have in common, whether we like it or not, is being a woman.
> Sooner or later we've got to work at it no matter how many other careers we've had or want.
> And in the last analysis nothing's any good unless you can look up just before dinner, or turn around in bed, there he is.
> Without that you're not a woman You're something with a French provincial office, or a book full of clippings, but you're not a woman

Compelling though Billie Dawn is as a character – she is certainly

Born Yesterday

(Courtesy of Columbia Pictures Entertainment and BFI stills archive)

the central character in the film, as Margot Channing is in *All About Eve* – she is always given in relation to the two opposing men, Harry and Paul.

The interesting thing is that whereas in 1951 in *Born Yesterday* the audience is invited to empathize with Paul's conception of the almost sacred nature of American 'democracy' and the centrality of high culture to this ideal, later in the decade this position is revealed (in popular cinema, at least) to be a hopelessly impractical one. In *East of Eden* it is Cal's materialist pragmatism which wins the day. British reviewers, while continuing to subscribe to the dominant social discourses concerning morality, the family, citizenship and so on, also betray an increasing unease about the aesthetics of popular culture:

> Steinbeck has provided an old-fashioned heavy sentimental drama, and Kazan has slickly tailored it in the modern, neurotic manner to suit a sick society.
>
> . . . a film dedicated to display, that mistakes mannerisms for style, artifice for art.
>
> Inflation is not only a headache with politicians and augurers of the stock markets: it hits one with a sickening thud from the screen. Before even the lights went down on *East of Eden*, I knew that it was inflated. One of those glossy melodramatic folders, all big names and hideously tinted photographs, had been handed to me, and at the top of it were the words: 'GREAT BOOKS, GREAT PLAYS, GREAT TALENT MAKE GREAT PICTURES (signed) Jack L. Warner.' Do They? What about GREAT GUFF? *East of Eden* is that.[45]

45 *Daily Worker*, 9 July 1955; *Sunday Times*, 10 July 1955; *New Statesman*, 16 July 1955.

But this thinly veiled distaste of the middle-class British aesthete for the melodramatic form itself, as well as for the unseemly American habit of loudly proclaiming one's virtues in the marketplace, conceals, it seems to me, a more deepseated unease about what was clearly understood, by the middle of the 1950s, to be the threatening invasion of American cultural influence in Britain.

Hanns Eisler in Hollywood

CLAUDIA GORBMAN

The modern composer must change from a parasite into a fighter.
Hanns Eisler[1]

It is heartening to report that the topos of film scholars' sorry neglect of film music is beginning to lose relevance in our critical literature.[2] Although it remains generally true that most film and television studies by non-music specialists indeed forget all about the musical score and its determining effects – after all, music is 'invisible', and it works that way on scholars too – an impressive, if slim, body of film music scholarship has been forming in the United States and Europe over the last decade. Much of it, in an effort to contribute to important contemporary paradigms of film study, has been preoccupied with situating historically and theoretically the 'classical Hollywood model' of film scoring.[3] Just as continuity editing constructs a coherent screen space and a unified, privileged subject, the classical score, governed by stylistic and formal paradigms, also constructs a privileged subject position and thus plays a central part in processes of filmic identification.

Film music scholars hasten to add that the model of the classical Hollywood score is scarcely a monolithic one. For example, the paradigmatic late-Romantic orchestral style is no longer *de rigueur*, other musical idioms having gained currency in the movies since jazz came to stay in the fifties. Nevertheless, during the sound era the classical model rarely met with any challenges in sustained or coherent form – not until 1947, that is, with the appearance of Hanns Eisler's book *Composing for the Films* (*CF*), which launched a searing attack on Hollywood scoring as the very embodiment of capitalism's appropriation of music for its own ends. Eisler saw

1 Hanns Eisler 'Some remarks on the situation of the modern composer' (1935) in Hanns Eisler, *A Rebel in Music* ed Manfred Grabs (Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers 1979), p 112

2 Among recent books are Claudia Gorbman *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Clifford McCarty (ed.) *Film Music I* (New York: Garland 1987); William Darby and Jack Du Bois, *American Film Music: Major Composers, Techniques, Trends, 1915–1990* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990) and forthcoming books by Kathryn Kalinak, Martin Marks, and Carol Flinn. See also the best composer's-eye view to date, Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright *On the Track: A Guide to Contemporary Film Scoring* (New York: Schirmer, 1990). There has in fact never existed a shortage of writing about film music by film composers, music critics or filmmakers.

3 Among works in English: Gorbman *Unheard Melodies*, chapter 4; Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (forthcoming), chapter 4; Carol Flinn 'The most romantic art of all: music in the classical Hollywood cinema', *Cinema Journal* vol 29 no 4 (1990)

Hollywood film music as technified, commodified, rationalized and narcotizing, an entirely mediated thing giving the dangerous pretence to immediacy. *Composing for the Films* maps out an oppositional political aesthetics of film music, drawing on the Frankfurt School, Eisenstein, and Brecht.

The details of Eisler's critique are well known [4] In this essay I wish to emphasize rather his book's proposals for an alternative film music practice that would be aesthetically and ideologically progressive – and the extent to which these ideas found their way into the film scores Eisler himself composed in Hollywood between 1942 and 1947 The interest of a study of Eisler's Hollywood-circumscribed theory and practice seems obvious to anyone concerned with film music and cultural studies, that scholars have thus far overlooked it is all the more curious. Musicologist Albrecht Betz may have taken his own cue from letters Eisler wrote during the forties when obliged by circumstance to earn a living in Hollywood – letters which express scorn for the studio bureaucracy and its sluggish resistance to any innovation – in deciding, for his otherwise thoroughgoing study of the composer's life and works, to devote not a chapter, not a page, but a single sentence to Eisler's film scores for Hollywood [5]

4 See Hanns Eisler *Composing for the Films* (New York Oxford University Press 1947) Philip Rosen, Adorno and film music theoretical notes on *Composing for the Films*' *Yale French Studies*, no 60 (1980) Tom Levin, 'The acoustic dimension', *Screen*, vol 25 no 3 (1984) pp 55–69, and Claudia Gorbman *Unheard Melodies* chapter 5

5 Albrecht Betz *Hanns Eisler Political Musician* trans Bill Hopkins (Cambridge Cambridge University Press 1982) [*Hanns Eisler Musik einer Zeit die sich eben bildet* (Munich Edition Text und Kritik, 1976)], p 185 Betz does describe at length Eisler's vocal chamber and orchestral music during the years in California and the social and intellectual company Eisler kept, as well as the anti-communist persecution of Eisler that led to his departure from the US in 1948

Eisler made the first mark of his musical career as a star pupil of Schoenberg in Vienna, where he gained recognition as a brilliant twelve-tone composer. But he abandoned the formalism and hermetic intellectualism of the Vienna School, deciding that music as a cultural product must be involved in cultural struggle. He moved to Berlin, centre of political and intellectual life, where cultural struggle in the mid twenties meant above all the workers' movement and the fight against fascism. Continuing on the one hand to compose concert music, he became an activist musician on the other, passionately concerned with understanding the social functions of music and believing in the revolutionary potential of modern music He maintained that music should inspire political awareness, clarifying the thoughts and feelings of those who performed and listened to it, by avoiding both the alienating complexity of advanced musical idioms and the 'corrupt moral passivity' of popular songs. Allying himself with communist groups, he composed numerous militant songs and workers' choruses – which no doubt rendered him one of the most widely performed composers in Europe at the time

Eisler's devotion to unconventional yet singable vocal music for the masses would remain important to him throughout his life He interpolated songs into his film scores of the twenties and thirties whenever possible His lifelong collaboration with Brecht, which began in 1927, produced many songs of various types: for the theatre, the cinema, the masses, and concert performance When

their work *Die Massnahme* (The Measures Taken) premiered at the Berlin Philharmonic Hall in 1930, Eisler could be found singing in the chorus that evening; such was his commitment He addressed, and continued to compose for, workers' choruses all over Europe during the thirties: in 1938, for example, he gave a speech to the choir of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union in New York, a kind of pep talk championing the inclusion of modern, relevant vocal works in their performances. A militant song makes its way into his first Hollywood film score, for *Hangmen Also Die*. It was Eisler, too, who wrote East Germany's national anthem in 1950.

The rise of fascism obliged him to leave Germany in 1933. For the next several years, Eisler and his wife travelled repeatedly throughout Europe (including the Soviet Union) and the United States, usually on commissions for concerts or film collaborations. In 1938 the New School for Social Research, often called the 'University in Exile', made possible his first extended stay in the United States; in New York he taught courses which included a series of twelve 'lectures on the social history of music' Byzantine complexities of US immigration regulations led to a stay in Mexico City. Then in February 1940, through the auspices of the New School, Eisler received a Rockefeller Foundation grant for what became a two-and-a-half-year study of the aesthetics and practice of film music – specifically, the possibilities for using the resources of modern music in films. The precedent for such funding had been established by the Rockefeller Foundation's grant the year before to T. W. Adorno's Princeton Radio Research Project. The film music study yielded almost ninety minutes of original music which Eisler composed for a variety of already existing film segments (including Joris Ivens's film *Rain* [1929] and a sequence from John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* [1940]), each of which presented specific aesthetic and dramaturgic challenges for the composer. More important for present purposes, the study eventually led to the publication by Oxford University Press of *Composing for the Films* [6]

Eisler most probably finished writing the book by summer 1944 Meanwhile, he had moved to California in April of 1942, to earn his living as a Hollywood composer There he would compose eight film scores, mostly for RKO, between 1942 and 1947.[7] By the time he wrote *Composing for the Films*, he had scored *Hangmen Also Die* and probably *None But the Lonely Heart*; by then he was no stranger to the studio system The contrast between the adventurous collaborations of his earlier film scoring along with the utopian conditions of the Rockefeller film music project, and the bureaucratic, profit-driven environment of Hollywood's film factories, had become a reality for him.

In *Composing for the Films* Eisler bemoans the ways in which the

6 Eisler had written the text by September 1944 The first draft of his preface (1944) can be found in Eisler's writings *Musik und Politik* (Leipzig Deutscher Verlag fur Musik, 1973–83), vol 1 pp 487–8 with scholarly notes by editor Gunter Mayer regarding the authorship of the book The first edition of *Composing for the Films* (1947) gives Eisler as author, in his preface he acknowledges T W Adorno's important contributions 'on general aesthetic and sociological matters as well as purely musical issues' The later French and German editions of the book, published after Eisler's death give Eisler and Adorno as coauthors Adorno stated in 1969 that he coauthored the book but that afraid of being implicated in the anti-communist witch hunt hounding Eisler in 1947, he had withdrawn his name as author Mayer points out however that 'in view of the draft of the 1944 [preface] i e at a time when an anti-communist campaign against the Eisler brothers was not yet being contemplated Adorno s 1969 claim of coauthorship appears to be highly questionable (*Musik und Politik*, p 489) Albrecht Betz credits coauthorship to Adorno anyway, detecting Adorno s writing style in much of the text Betz *Hanns Eisler Political Musician*, p 183

7 *Hangmen Also Die* (Fritz Lang, orig story Brecht, RKO 1943) *None But the Lonely Heart* (Clifford Odets, RKO, 1944) *Jealousy* (Gustav Machaty, Republic 1945), *The Spanish Main* (Frank Borzage RKO 1945), *A Scandal in Paris/ Thieves Holiday* (Douglas Sirk, United Artists 1946) *Deadline at Dawn* (Harold Clurman scr Odets, RKO, 1946) *Woman on the Beach* (Jean Renoir RKO 1947) *So Well Remembered* (Edward Dmytryk RKO 1947)

studio hierarchy prevents any real dramaturgical integration of music and the rest of the film. First, he notes that the organization of production is fragmented into a conveyor-belt routine. Each studio has its music department, whose director parcels out duties of composing and arranging for current productions. Further specialization – some musicians compose nothing but military music, some do nothing but Wild West music, others write solely Vienna waltzes and operetta music – alienates composers from their labour, which is boring and repetitious, and allows them no vision of the whole Production is also rationalized in terms of schedule, so that the composer, rather than being involved from the planning stages, is brought in only at the end, when he has four to six weeks in which to hastily conceptualize and write up to an hour's worth of music for the soundtrack Someone else then arranges the score – a procedure that scandalizes Eisler, for the notion of separating orchestration from composition is alien to him – and finally, yet another person conducts the music in recording sessions. Furthermore, music recording and mixing practices, institutionalized as rules and executed by specialists, conspire to make any radically different uses or dynamics of music (such as loud music behind dialogue) a logical impossibility in studio production. In sum, 'whatever passes through the machinery bears its mark, is predigested, neutralized, levelled down' (*CF*, p. ix)

In practice Eisler did find solutions to some of the alienating conditions he describes For the most part he managed to get hired for film projects which, if never radical, held some political or aesthetic interest Among the writers and directors with whom Eisler collaborated were Lang, Brecht, Odets, Clurman, Renoir and Sirk. As one of very few film composers who orchestrated his own scores, he gained several advantages. By sidestepping arrangers, he had unusual control over the instrumental colours on the soundtrack. He sketched music cues not as piano 'reductions' which would later be fleshed out by orchestrators, as was the practice of almost everyone else at the time, but from the very outset he scored for specific instruments. Eisler generally received two to three thousand dollars for a film score – on the lower end of the pay scale – plus about five dollars per score page of orchestration, so an Eisler job meant financial savings for the studio (A 1945 letter from Clifford Odets to an RKO producer mentions this very fact as a selling point in favour of rehiring Eisler, this time for scoring Renoir's *Woman on the Beach*.)

Eisler's position on the function of music in films draws from both Brecht and Adorno. Adorno's influence came at a time when Eisler was himself experiencing the full force of the culture industry, discussions with Adorno provided Eisler with a fuller analysis of the nature of music in advanced capitalist society, where the culture industry's insatiable need for more products forms a vicious cycle of

ever-encroaching rationalization and alienation of art. It is his Brecht side, associated with his European experience of militant proletarian culture, that allows Eisler some relief from the bleak pessimism of Adorno's conclusions regarding the futility of seeking authentic expression in art under capitalism. For Eisler an alternative is both possible and desirable. The greatest enemy in film composing is conventional music and the automatic associations it evokes Implicitly Eisler equates convention with political retrogression because of the automatism it fosters in the listener. Music appeals to the emotions, and is systematically manipulated by the culture industry to do so at the service of the status quo· 'Rationally planned irrationality is the very essence of the amusement industry in all its branches'. (*CF*, p. 23) A series of metaphors running through *Composing for the Films* likens conventional film music to advertising, a barker for a circus, a sedative.

An oppositional practice must consequently avoid or break conventions and conventional meanings But *Composing for the Films* is sometimes inconsistent on the question of exactly what the mission of music in films ought to be. Sometimes we read that the musical score must awaken the viewer's intellectual faculties, and unmask the advanced technical means of the cinema's imaginary signifier Elsewhere we find a less radical, more pragmatic tone· music can sharpen contrasts, release latent narrative suspense, and so on. These positions, slightly at odds with each other, reflect the difference between Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* – the notion of breaking convention for purposes of ideological distancing – and Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or making-strange – the Russian Formalist strategy of breaking convention in order to defamiliarize, for aesthetic and not necessarily political ends.

It is the Shklovskian approach that Eisler takes up when he speaks of the advantages of twentieth-century musical idioms for film. Citing Schoenberg, Bartok and Stravinsky as exemplars, he writes that modern, unfamiliar musical resources can be expressive more effectively than the then standard Romantic style. He advocates modern music not for its increased number of dissonances, but for 'the dissolution of the conventionalized musical idiom'. The absence of cliches will encourage the listener to grasp the scene from a fresh point of view. The new music's lack of predetermined meaning will actually give greater precision of meaning when it is heard with the picture. It will express 'fear and horror, . . . extreme tenderness, ironic detachment, empty waiting, and unfettered power . . .', not through the mood-establishing tricks inherited from the Kinotheks, but through dramatic complementarity between music and picture Eisler calls for music to give renewed sensation.

He provides an example of this advantage of modern music from his own score for *Hangmen Also Die*: a loud, dissonant, penetrating ten-note chord accompanies the fourth shot of the film as we see a large portrait of Hitler which hangs in the Nazi-occupied castle at Prague. Surely the music efficiently signifies danger, perhaps with more expressive power than a more tonally conventional 'menacing' chord. But contrary to what Eisler might have intended, his chord also wholly conforms to Hollywood stereotype: it's a 'stinger', a sudden *sforzando* whose dissonance places dramatic emphasis on Hitler as the incarnation of evil, the bad guy in this anti-Nazi melodrama.

Of course, Russian Formalism views art as a historical process Yesterday's defamiliarizing device is today's convention. Eisler's insistence on renewing film music's forms, harmony, and instrumentation may have less enduring value than his general emphasis on avoiding hackneyed musical formulas. His modern musical materials in the Hollywood films often end up reinforcing mood in traditional ways. A tense muted trumpet as the cab driver in *Deadline at Dawn* finally confesses to the murder produces an effect which scarcely differs, when heard in context, from that of any other well-trained Hollywood composer's cue given the same scene History, but also the audience's musical experience, determines what is cliche and what is not. Last year I showed a short segment of *Woman on the Beach* to a group of film specialists, and later to a roomful of musicologists. The first group was struck by the thought-provokingly unorthodox cue that accompanies the scene in which Robert Ryan first sets eyes on Joan Bennett on the beach They agreed that a more conventional score would go for an overtly 'romantic' or 'mysterious' music cue, whereas Eisler's, tonally noncommittal, brings out the emotional ambiguity of the encounter The musicologists watching the same scene protested this assessment, finding the score entirely predictable – precisely because they had ears finely attuned to twentieth-century music

But consider another example of the new music as Eisler conceives its contributions to cinema dramaturgy Early in the film *Kuhle Wampe* (Slatan Dudow, 1932, scored by Eisler),

> A slum district of drab, dilapidated suburban houses is shown in all its misery and filth. The atmosphere is passive, hopeless, depressing The accompanying music is brisk, sharp, a polyphonic prelude of a marcato character, and its strict form and stern tone, contrasted with the loose structure of the scenes, acts as a shock deliberately aimed at arousing resistance rather than sentimental sympathy (*CF*, pp. 26–7)

'A shock aimed at arousing resistance rather than sentimental sympathy': Eisler clearly employs a Brechtian strategy here, in the

sense that through a disjunction of image and sound he intends to create a political awareness in his listeners.

Similarly, in *Hangmen Also Die*: the 'hangman' of the title, Reinhard Heydrich, Reichsprotektor in Czechoslovakia, has been shot.

> He has a broken spine and is receiving a blood transfusion. There is a gloomy hospital atmosphere in the whole scene, which lasts only fourteen seconds. The attention of the spectator is centered on the dripping of the blood. The action is stalled, as it were, and for that reason the scene needs music. The most natural solution was to take the dripping of the blood as a point of departure. There could be no question of expressing the dying man's emotions . Because Heydrich is a hangman, the musical formulation is a political issue; a German, fascist picture, by resorting to tragic and heroic music, could have transformed the criminal into a hero The composer's task was to impart the true perspective of the scene . and to bring out the significant point by brutal means. The music makes for adequate reactions on the part of the listeners and precludes the wrong associations (*CF*, p. 28)

What Eisler did write for the shot (which, by the way, lasts only six seconds in the finished picture) is a high-pitched cue whose predominant sound is a piccolo performing a fast, flight of the bumblebee-esque melody which ends abruptly after tripping up a chromatic scale; it is accompanied by the piano and higher string instruments playing *pizzicato* tone clusters (marking the blood dripping). The resulting audiovisual effect is certainly odd, carrying connotations of joyfulness and inconsequentiality. A Max Steiner would surely have either left this brief segment silent, or written a low-register, minor-mode *sostenuto* for organ, low brasses, or cellos and basses, connoting the Nazi commander's imminent death, with its ominous consequences for the Czech people While such a solution would hardly threaten to 'transform the criminal into a hero', or cause viewers to identify with the faceless body Lang has filmed in long shot, Eisler's strategy is really quite radical As a music cue one might more easily expect to hear in a cartoon, it seems to chuckle maliciously at the dying Heydrich – refusing to allow a response of melodrama and hand-wringing, but rather a fleeting moment of jubilation among the country's resistance fighters

These examples from *Kuhle Wampe* and *Hangmen Also Die* only begin to suggest the importance of the montage aesthetic in Eisler's thought. On the theoretical level, Eisler holds that music and picture are two separate media whose separateness ought to be emphasized rather than falsely denied. The classical tendency to 'fuse' music to

picture arises from an ideological project to camouflage the illusory character of the whole. Drawing a formal analogy between the textual body and the social body, claiming that the text's illusion of coherence reinforces society's illusion of its own coherence, Eisler demands a cinema that makes palpable the divergence of sound and image

> The alienation of the media from each other reflects a society alienated from itself, men whose functions are severed from each other. . . Therefore the aesthetic divergence of the media is potentially a legitimate means of expression, not merely a regrettable deficiency that has to be concealed as well as possible (*CF*, p 74)

> The development of cinema music will be measured by the extent to which it is able to make this antithetic relation fruitful and to dispel the illusion of direct unity (*CF*, p. 78)

By what methods can the film score make the music–narrative antithesis fruitful? One of Eisler's favourite techniques is a particular use of songs. With fifteen years of work with Brecht behind him, he emphasizes the power of interpolating songs into the film as foreign elements, interruptions, to raise the experience of the film 'from the realm of literal immediacy into that of meaning'. (*CF*, p. 74) As I have mentioned, songs abound in Eisler's earlier film work. Take the famous *Solidaritatslied* (Solidarity Song) in *Kuhle Wampe*. The unemployed, in their huge squatters' camp outside the city, adopt this militant song, whose melody is unconventional yet singable, as an anthem. Some of Brecht's lyrics:

> Vorwarts und nicht vergessen . .
> Beim Hungern und beim Essen
> Vorwarts, nicht vergessen
> Die Solidaritat! .
> Wessen Strasse ist die Strasse
> Wessen Welt ist die Welt?

> [Forward, and not forgotten .
> Though starvation may threaten
> Forward, and not forgotten
> Our solidarity! . .
> Whose city is the city,
> Whose world is the world?]

Another example of a solidarity-in-adversity song appears in *Hangmen Also Die* Czech citizens, taken hostage by the Nazis until Heydrich's assassin should turn himself in, compose a song in prison

Fellow patriots, the time has come
Fellow patriots, there's work to be done
Raise the invisible torch . .
Die if you must for a cause that is just
But shout to the end, 'NO SURRENDER!'

But these songs, heard diegetically and then nondiegetically in each film, do not carry their films out of the 'realm of literal immediacy' On the contrary, they bring a lump to the throat, make the heart swell with uncritical emotion – not unlike the male chorus on the soundtrack as the cattle drive begins in *Red River* (1948), or the pop songs that accompany Tom Cruise's military flight training runs in *Top Gun* (1986). Eisler no doubt highly valued the militant songs, whose spirit arose from his Berlin period, since they work so effectively to arouse feelings for the 'right' cause.

His suggestion in *Composing for the Films* that songs can create a *break* in the illusion refers to something else – songs that have a dialectical or contrapuntal relation to the action. A stunning case of this occurs in *Kuhle Wampe*. Two young lovers are shown walking into the woods as a female voice, accompanied by an instrumental ensemble, sings the first line of a song· 'The play of the lovers is new each spring . .'.[8] Over shots of nature, empty of humans, the song continues to describe the maiden's heart bestirred by the young man's tender touch It continues with platitudes about romantic love and nature, over these shots of undulating meadows and deep woods which metonymically suggest sexual relations occurring between the two lovers Suddenly the composition and performance switch to a harsh, more ominous sound, the singer fairly shouts, 'Lavish is the wealth of the trees and the grasses in springtime / And the fruit of the forest will not wane . . ' Strident music seems to contradict pastoral lyrics and images, until the closing of the song makes sense of it. The young couple emerges from the wood, a bit rumpled and somewhat less enamoured, as the voice sings, 'Now bears the earth anew and no fear or caution restrains'. In case any doubt remains, there soon follows a montage depicting the young woman's fears of pregnancy and of a child she cannot possibly support

In this sequence the film has reversed the normal music–image relationship The song as a whole does not 'illustrate' young love, even though its lyrics would seem to. A dialectical interaction between image, narrative, lyrics, singing style, and formal musical properties creates multilevelled ironies about the Romantic tradition of juxtaposing love and nature, the relation between romance and its repressed consequence, pregnancy, and the non-uniqueness of individuals in love ('each spring', and so on).

Aside from his mention of the disruptive aesthetic potential of songs in *Composing for the Films*, and his radical use of one in *Kuhle Wampe*, Eisler's imaginings of what the 'divergence of the

8 The German text
Das Spiel des Geschlechter
erneuert sich
Jedes Fruhjahr Die Liebenden
Finden sich zusammen Schon
die sacht umfassende Hand
Des Geliebten macht die Brust
des Mädchens erschauern
Ihr fluchtiger Blick verfuhrt ihn

Masslos ist das Wachstum der
Bäume und Gräser
Im Fruhjahr
Ohne Unterlass fruchtbar
Ist der Wald, sind die Wiesen
die Felder
Und es gebiert die Erde das
Neue
Ohne Vorsicht

media' could do in practice to dispel illusionary unity consist only of brief hints – hints that seem eerily prophetic of Godard. Eisler states that it should be possible to 'introduce music at certain points without any pictures or words, and at other points, instead of gradually concluding the music or cautiously fading it out, to break it off abruptly' (*CF*, p. 79) When he suggests that music could be used to 'outshout' the narrative action, he presumably means having the music's volume drown out other sound and/or dominate the image When we recall the aesthetic radicalism of these proposals as they are carried out in the cinema of Godard – consider, for example, the string quartet in *Prénom Carmen/First Name Carmen* (1984) and its fence-sitting status as either nondiegetic or inhabiting a parallel diegetic world to the main narrative – we realize what force of vision resided in this refugee in 1940s Hollywood

Composing for the Films draws most of its examples from Eisler's independent European films, from his two pre-Hollywood American projects,[9] and from his first Hollywood feature, made with Lang and Brecht The real challenge, it would seem, comes when the Marxist intellectual composer signs on to more frankly commercial projects in Hollywood For how can music accomplish anti-bourgeois, anti-conventional goals in an entirely bourgeois, entirely rationalized, industry? Even if the composer can get away with writing a 'progressive' score, can a politically correct *part* have any progressive effect in a regressive *whole*? If the film relegates the musical score to the 'background', will unconventional scoring have any effect, political or otherwise, on the viewer's consciousness?

9 *Pete Roleum and His Cousins* (Joseph Losey 1939) and *The Four Hundred Million* (Joris Ivens 1939)

Every one of Eisler's American film scores merits attention, if for nothing more than the sheer dramaturgical intelligence and musical interest of each Here I shall only mention some hallmarks of the Eisler style and approach. First, his 'sound' is distinctive sometimes tonal, but more often straining at the bounds of tonality, harmonically complex and tonally indeterminate Eisler's palette of instrumental combinations becomes quickly recognizable to the listener; it differs markedly from the florid yet more limited vocabulary of studio orchestral arrangers. Emancipated from conventions of orchestration, harmony and melody, the Eisler sound elicits few stereotyped emotional associations.

Contrary to what one might expect from reading his condemnations of Hollywood music's slavish imitation of the visuals, Eisler often coordinates music with picture very precisely. Sometimes this coordination brings out rhythms of movement in the frame or rhythms of editing (see, for example, the beautiful passage in *So Well Remembered* where a cue for strings urgently punctuates the brief sequence showing the printing of posters warning of the diphtheria epidemic, and mothers taking their children to the clinic for vaccination) Often, though, his music emphasizes dramatic

moments in much the same way advocated in 'classical' practice.

Eisler abhorred the leitmotif as a technique wrongheadedly borrowed from opera and applied to film scoring. Not surprisingly, most of his American scores avoid leitmotifs. *None But the Lonely Heart* has a sort of built in leitmotif for Ernie Mott's female neighbour; but it seems that in cases where Eisler has jurisdiction over the form of the score, repeated themes rarely if ever occur

Eisler's American film music often chooses not to underscore emotionally, but rather invites intellectual interpretation of the narrative action For example, again in *None But the Lonely Heart* Ernie Mott's mother realizes her good-for-nothing son has returned home when she notices his dog sleeping in the hall Her face shows scorn and disgust Eisler's music counterbalances the effects of Ethel Barrymore's acting. A harmonically ambiguous passage in flute and strings checks any melodramatic reaction, and has the effect of making the spectator–listener reserve judgement on the relationship between Ernie and his mother. In *The Woman on the Beach*, Robert Ryan begins to realize that Joan Bennett, a married woman with whom he is having an affair, has had other lovers, and he becomes indignantly enraged. Bennett responds matter-of-factly. A Steiner score here would emphasize the femme fatale in Bennett, underscoring her threat to Ryan's sexual dominance Eisler's light, unemphatic accompaniment, on the other hand, gives weight to her straightforward sexuality, music helps to demystify the ordinary sexism of the rules of Hollywood romance.

Consulting *The Spanish Main*, by far the most commercial and conventional RKO picture Eisler scored, should reveal the extent to which practice could measure up to theory. This 1945 adventure-romance swashbuckler had a big budget. it was RKO's first Technicolor venture, and it had respectable stars in Maureen O'Hara, who had already proven her worth in other pirate pictures such as *The Black Swan* (1942) and *Jamaica Inn* (1939); and in Paul Henreid, who had established his suave and principled image in *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Casablanca* (1942) Walter Slezak played the foppish and cruel viceroy Don Alvarado, whose bride-to-be, the Mexican countess Francisca (O'Hara), falls in love instead with the dashing and decent pirate-king Laurent (Henreid). It was hardly the kind of film Eisler desired to work on: in a letter to his son, he referred to 'an idiotic piece of junk, called *The Spanish Main* It's pure nonsense, garbage – I had to do it for the money'

What emerged in *The Spanish Main* is a score with recognizable Eisler tonalities and orchestration, but which seems to serve the most orthodox purposes. After the credits, the film opens with a ship running aground on the Spanish coast during a storm. musical mickeymousing par excellence – strong low minor chords in the brasses reinforce the dark tragedy of the shipwreck, while a high, busy violin line mimics the high winds.

The score contains so much musical illustration, in fact, that one begins to wonder if Eisler wasn't overdoing it just to amuse himself. Consider what follows the opening shipwreck. The captain of the unfortunate Dutch vessel learns to his horror that not only does the Spanish viceroy refuse to allow him to repair and resupply his ship, he is also planning to imprison the crew indefinitely and commit them to slavery When this music-filled confrontation scene between captain Laurent and Don Alvarado reaches a climax with Laurent's line, 'My people are not *slaves* to be *sold* by me or *bought* by *any*one', Eisler's score does some very elaborate auditory mickeymousing – a minutely coordinated rhythmic and melodic orchestral underscoring of the dialogue [10] (Not even notable mickeymouser Max Steiner was likely to write music to mimic dialogue this closely, though Erich Korngold, famous in the industry for his complex underscoring – sometimes to the point of rehearsing actors to declaim their lines so as to fit with his musical plan – might) Don Alvarado says: 'Your people are trespassers, and for me to dispose of as I see fit ' He tears up valuable documents for Laurent's expedition before the latter's eyes. A drumroll rises in an enormous crescendo, until Laurent literally dives across the table to attack Don Alvarado He is restrained by guards, but not before another stinger accompanies Alvarado's gesture of plunging a knife into the table. Then, as Alvarado stands up, a monodic line in the low strings moves upwards, and so on through the film. Excessive though the description of the musical underscoring might sound, this is standard classical practice.

10 Only rarely does one come across instrumental music that imitates the inflections of the speaking voice probably because the processes of both writing and performing it are so laborious For a contemporary example see Steve Reich s remarkable and moving piece 'Different Trains' (1988) performed by the Kronos string quartet

For the most part, then, this score marries music to film action, and in so doing embodies the very aesthetic of illusionism and pretence to immediacy that *Composing for the Films* rails against. A temptation might arise to attribute ironic intent to Eisler's score. Eisler does suggest that music written either in 'ruthless opposition' or with 'revealing exaggeration' can rebel against a bad picture which it is called on to accompany (*CF*, p. 117) He regretfully concludes that the culture industry dooms such attempts at artistic sabotage from the start either studio executives will nip them in the bud, or the public won't notice the strategy anyway. Still, we might wonder why the mickeymousing in parts of *The Spanish Main* becomes so overblown, and we might also wonder what moved Eisler even to mention the futile inspiration of musical sabotaging at all Is the orchestra's aping of Paul Henreid's self-righteous 'My people are not slaves' the rare indulgence of a jaded composer?

Now and then in *The Spanish Main* the music manages to work slightly against the mood of the action on the screen For example, when the innocent Dutch crewmen have been thrown into the dungeon of Don Alvarado's castle, and it is feeding time, the music takes on an oppositional role, in a way resembling the 'drab buildings' example cited from *Kuhle Wampe*. A driving, purposeful-

sounding music cue accompanies this scene; it expresses something of heroism and struggle, hints that resistance is growing in the face of injustice even at the sailors' most miserable moment. Eisler's political idealism comes out only when the film can conventionally sanction it. In this case, as the hero and his men are mistreated by the autocratic Spaniards, the music can express collective indignation and resolve. Otherwise, it remains the conventional servant of the Hollywood drama, giving drum and trumpet-filled high adventure during battles at sea, and sweet violins when love is in the air. In *The Spanish Main* one may easily discern the 'Eisler sound', but a sound robbed of virtually all progressive potential.

Thus we arrive at the central contradiction in Eisler's aesthetics: the contradiction between what he considered aesthetically and politically necessary and what was feasible given the limitations of the system. In practice, the more commercial the undertaking, the more compromised the film-musical principles became – in fact, the more indistinguishable his scores from those of other composers Eisler was by no means unaware of this. In the first place, he notes in *Composing for the Films* that the culture industry's tendency toward standardization, from sound recording and mixing to editing, combined with countless mechanisms of censorship (in production and in the spectator) neutralize the effects of any musical style, even the most modern. People who might not normally tolerate jazz, for example, will accept it willingly as part of a background film score. More importantly, he was quite aware that in the viewing experience the progressive part (music) will most likely be absorbed by the reactionary whole·

> As regards motion-picture music, the possibilities of improvement are considerably narrowed down, aside from the general conditions of production, by a far more primitive factor, namely, the present nature of motion-picture material, pictures, and dialogues Fundamentally, no motion-picture music can be better than what it accompanies. Music for a trashy picture is to some extent trashy, no matter how elegantly or skilfully it has solved its problems. (*CF*, p. 116)

Are we to read Eisler's Hollywood scores as failures in the light of his theoretical principles, his biography, and existing musicological literature? Certainly not, for they contain some of the most intelligent, passionate and compellingly original passages in American film music Nor did Eisler himself wholly give up on his revolutionary idealism, faded as it might have been by the vicissitudes of a life that led him from the exhilaration and urgency of Berlin in the twenties to the mind-numbing mercantilism of Hollywood in the forties. Elsewhere in the richly contradictory *Composing for the Films*, Eisler states that despite the constraints imposed on him, the film composer with integrity can make a

difference. There is always hope, 'however feeble', that consistently good composing of modern music can raise the standards of music in film.

I wish to acknowledge gratefully the contributions and support of the late John Hall of the RKO film archives in early stages of the preparation of this article

Black feminism and media criticism: *The Women of Brewster Place*

JACQUELINE BOBO and ELLEN SEITER

That black women are writing and talking about their history, their politics and their socioeconomic status is not a recent occurrence, though it has sometimes been treated as if it is a 1980s phenomenon. Hazel Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, documents the fact that black women have long used the mechanisms available to them to attain a 'public voice'. Whether in writing, public speaking, or establishing national networks among a wide spectrum of black women, black feminists have worked diligently to comment upon and improve their social condition [1] Other recent research by black women has recovered a wealth of literary and political work written by black women and used this as the basis for formalizing a body of thought concerning black feminist theory.[2] This archaeological work was necessary, notes Valerie Smith, because black women had been structured out of the writings of others.[3] The consequences of this neglect were that black women were misrepresented in the theoretical writings of others, if not omitted entirely. For cultural critics this was a particularly vexing problem, in that one of its consequences has been a limited access to works created by black women: now, however, the groundwork has been laid by literary scholars for an analysis of a range of cultural products. No longer can a text constructed by a black woman be considered in isolation from the context of its creation, from its connection with other works within the tradition of black women's creativity, and from its impact not just on cultural critics but on cultural consumers. As we

1 Hazel Carby *Reconstructing Womanhood The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York Oxford University Press, 1987)

2 Examples are Barbara Christian *Black Women Novelists The Development of a Tradition 1892–1976* (Westport, Conn Greenwood Press 1980), Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960* (New York Anchor Press, 1987), and more recent essays about black feminist theory in Cheryl Wall (ed) *Changing Our Own Words Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (New Brunswick, NJ Rutgers University Press, 1989), and Joanne Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin (eds) *Wild Women in the Whirlwind Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ Rutgers University Press 1990)

3 Valerie Smith, 'Black feminist theory and the representation of the "Other"', in Cheryl A Wall (ed), *Changing Our Own Words*, pp 38–57, 'Gender and Afro-Americanist literary theory and criticism', in Elaine Showalter (ed) *Speaking of Gender* (New York Routledge, Chapman and Hall 1989) pp 56–70

witness the aggressive move towards adapting black women's literature for film and television, a similar effort directed at film and television criticism is now needed. Of course, different considerations must be brought to bear on a work of literature and on its media transformation; which suggests that some theoretical work needs to be done. Film studies has in large part shunned the study of adaptations as too literary, too traditional, and too uninformed by developments in film theory. But, in the case of black women's fiction, adaptations to film and television are the primary, if not the only, source of black feminist thought available to a large audience.[4] Works such as *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, Warner Bros, 1985) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (Donna Deitch, ABC, 1989) represent a particularly vital area of popular narrative film and television today, and have the potential to challenge existing conventions of representation and characterization of women in ways that can also attract a broad, mass audience

This article begins with a consideration of the ways in which black women and other women of colour have been either neglected or only selectively included in the writings of feminist cultural analysts· we consider the responses by women of colour to this omission, the ramifications for feminist studies, and some ways in which this neglect might be redressed We then turn to an analysis of the television version of *The Women of Brewster Place*, which was based upon the novel by the black American writer Gloria Naylor. Examining the insertion of *The Women of Brewster Place* within a range of political and social appropriations can provide a necessary intervention in the struggle over the meaning of black women's artistic work This analysis assesses the programme from the perspective of its usefulness for feminist cultural criticism in general and of its position within the politics of popular cultural representations.[5]

The politics of feminist cultural criticism

The problematic relationship between the feminism of middle-class white women and issues affecting other women, in particular women of colour, has been documented in several well-known works which examine differences between women from historical and social perspectives [6] For example, Hazel Carby, a black feminist cultural critic, has looked at the historical, social and economic conditions governing the lives of black and white women, emphasizing that oppression manifests itself differently in black and white women's lives A crucial difference arose from women's roles during the slavocracy· white women were used (in part) to produce heirs to an

4 This point is made by Barbara Christian in 'The race for theory', *Feminist Studies*, vol 14, no 1 (1988), pp 67–79 This is a revision and update of an article first published in *Cultural Critique* no 6 (1987), pp 51–63

5 Although much of what is written in this article concerns women of colour in the United States, we would like to think it can be more broadly applicable and useful for feminists in other countries For a more specific detailing of black women s cultural activities throughout the world see the entry on 'Black Cinema', in Annette Kuhn (ed), *Women in Film An International Guide* (New York Ballantine, 1991)

6 See for instance, bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston South End Press, 1981) Gloria I Joseph and Jill Lewis (eds) *Common Differences Conflict in Black and White Feminists Perspectives* (New York Anchor, 1981)

oppressive system; black women functioned as breeders to produce property that added to the capital accumulation of the plantation system. The continuing divergent material circumstances would later affect the production of black and white women's texts about the status of their various oppressions.[7]

Aida Hurtado, writing about the different ways patriarchy has affected white women and women of colour, notes that white women in the US have responded with the notion that the personal is political. Hurtado stresses that the political consciousness of women of colour 'stems from an awareness that the public is *personally* political'.[8] Her conclusion that the public sphere contains the elements of political thought and activity for women of colour is especially important for white feminist critics to recognize:

> the public/private distinction is relevant only for the white middle and upper classes since historically the American state has intervened constantly in the private lives and domestic arrangements of the working class. Women of Color have not had the benefit of the economic conditions that underlie the public/private distinction. White feminists' concerns about the unhealthy consequences of standards for feminine beauty, their focus on the unequal division of household labor, and their attention to childhood identity formation stem from a political consciousness that seeks to project private sphere issues into the public arena. Feminists of Color focus instead on public issues such as affirmative action, racism, school desegregation, prison reform and voter registration – issues that cultivate an awareness of the distinction between public policy and private choice.[9]

White feminist film and video critics can learn from the writings and experiences that have characterized fiction and literary criticism by women of colour. However, greater effort needs to be devoted to making this work available. Michele Wallace – a black feminist cultural critic who has taken some difficult stands against impediments to black women's progress – addresses a significant aspect of the problem. Her book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), along with Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1978), are considered pivotal works in contemporary debates about the racial 'correctness' of black women's cultural works. Wallace has criticized Adrienne Rich in her role as an intermediary between black women's writing and the public dissemination of their work. In her review of Rich's *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1986) for the *New York Times Book Review*, she chronicles Rich's political evolution, noting that when Rich won the National Book Award for poetry in 1974, she insisted that the honour be shared between herself and the black women who were also nominated, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde.[10] Wallace writes that even though Rich

7 See Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* and also her earlier assessment of the relationship of white feminism to the actual lives of women of colour in 'White woman listen black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back Race and Racism in Seventies Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp 212–35

8 Aida Hurtado 'Relating to privilege seduction and rejection in the subordination of white women and women of color', *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol 14 no 4 (1989), p 849

9 Ibid., p 850

10 Michele Wallace 'Sexism is the least of it' *New York Times Book Review*, 17 March 1987 p 18

might have the best of intentions, she 'pretends to sponsor that which is not in her power to sponsor, that which she can only silence a Black feminist voice and/or theory'. Wallace explains that Rich exercises control over the works of black women and other women of colour in that she is a gatekeeper for those works that will appear on the 'essential reading list' She adds: 'When I say reading list, that's a euphemistic way of referring to book contracts, book sales, teaching jobs, tenure, publication in anthologies and journals, without which it is now impossible to be a writer, much less a black feminist writer.'[11]

11 Michele Wallace, 'The politics of location cinema/theory/ literature/ethnicity/sexuality/me *Framework*, no 36 (1989) pp 42–55

The gatekeeping function of certain strains of white feminist thought extends beyond being a filter through which designated works are sifted: it limits the kinds of issues that can be written or thought about. Because much of the creative and theoretical work written by black women is available only through alternative outlets, some mainstream critics remain ignorant of, and uneducated in, black feminist thought. Wallace writes that the problem at present represents

> a critical juncture at the crossroads of a white mainstream academic feminism, which is well paid, abundantly sponsored and self-consciously articulate, and a marginalised, activist-oriented Black feminism, which is not well-paid, virtually unsubsidized and generally inarticulate, unwritten, unpublished and unread.[12]

12 Ibid , p 48

In the face of these shortcomings, feminists working within cultural studies need to rethink their writing. Jane Gaines, a white feminist cultural critic, has assessed the inadequacies of contemporary feminist criticism (Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist feminism) in its practice of examining creative works only for their significance to white, middle-class heterosexual women. Gaines chastises mainstream feminists for their token gestures towards the inclusion of different perspectives, stating 'our political etiquette is correct, but our theory is not so perfect'.[13]

13 Jane Gaines 'White privilege and looking relations race and gender in feminist film theory *Screen*, vol 29, no 4 (1988), pp 12–26 Gaines succinctly assesses the difficulties of theorizing about 'the other' using traditional feminist analysis

In a similar critique, Coco Fusco details the political expediency within the current 'crisis of conscience'. Fusco criticizes avant-garde art institutions and the individuals who operate them for their selective inclusion of works by people of colour and for the assumption that a 'single event' series can serve as a corrective to decades of racism and sexism. Since these serve as mediators between works by people of colour and public knowledge of their existence, Fusco feels that the avant garde needs to look to its own practices and reexamine its perspective on 'the other'.[14]

14 Coco Fusco, Fantasies of oppositionality reflections on recent conferences in Boston and New York *Screen*, vol 29, no 4 (1988) pp 80–93 A rebuttal to Fusco s article was presented in a later issue of *Screen* Berenice Reynaud and Yvonne Rainer 'Responses to Coco Fusco's ' Fantasies of oppositionality with reply from Coco Fusco, *Screen*, vol 30 no 3 (1989) pp 79–100

A survey of the opinions of many feminist media analysts in the recent special issue of *Camera Obscura* on 'the spectatrix' makes clear the lack of substantial theorizing about issues around class or race and cinema. After summarizing the terrain of female spectatorship, the editors admit that there is a difficulty in redressing

this omission: it is easier, they say, to recognize that spectator positions involving race, class, age, and so on need to be taken into account than it is 'to arrive at satisfactory methods for doing so, or even more simply, to understand what it is that we want to know, and why' [15]

What we want to know and why we as cultural commentators need to know it is exemplified in the problem of sampling currently confronting researchers in cultural studies, audience studies and ethnographic work Recently there has been a surge in empirical work in reader/audience studies, especially relating to women's genres such as romance, melodrama and soap opera In cultural studies work on audiences (as in much of the mass communications research it seeks to oppose), samples have tended overwhelmingly to be white This fact deserves a closer look it is too frequent an occurrence to be shunted aside or excused by the brief apologies which attribute white samples to limited funding or scope. It is not something that 'just happens', not simply a case of sampling error, nor of the failure of individual researchers to be sufficiently diligent in making contacts, although these are certainly factors that contribute to the problem.

This situation has partly to do with the demographics of the academy in the United States: who the researchers are (predominantly white), where they live (in segregated white neighbourhoods), and where they work. Occupational segregation has been durably established in US universities whites filling professorial ranks and senior positions, and people of colour relegated to service and clerical positions, or assuming faculty positions in small numbers and at untenured, junior levels This structure remains in place even as many institutions pay fashionable lip service to their efforts toward diversity in faculty and student population. It also, and less obviously, has to do with the trend towards interviewing respondents in their homes Women of colour will probably be less likely to welcome white researchers into their homes than will white women As long as the state so often interferes in their private sphere under the guise of a range of seemingly innocuous ventures, women of colour will be wary of intrusions into their domestic space by white middle-class professionals Thus, while theoretically sound, the increased emphasis of late on the crucial role of the domestic sphere in shaping media consumption must be scrutinized in terms of the limitations it may set on the kinds of participants available for studies involving the home as both site and object of research.[16]

James Clifford, among others, has called attention to the unequal power relations inherent in the ethnographic enterprise and to the 'objectification' of the subject in ethnographic discourse.[17] While many white social scientists are only now considering these issues, people of colour have long been aware of the possibilities of being

15 Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, 'The female spectator contexts and directions', *Camera Obscura* nos 20–21 (1989), pp 5–27

16 See, for example David Morley, *Family Television Cultural Power and Domestic Media* (London Comedia, 1986), Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance Women Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press 1984) and studies such as those by Rogge Tulloch, and Seiter, in Ellen Seiter et al (eds) *Remote Control Television, Audiences and Cultural Power* (London Routledge, 1989)

17 An early influential article on this topic is James Clifford On ethnographic authority *Representations* vol 1 no 2 (1983), pp 118–46

ripped off by researchers, and of the ways in which academic studies are often used in the long run to legitimate various forms of oppression. While it would be wrong to dismiss ethnography as a valuable method, it has to be recognized that it produces knowledge which circulates in influential ways within the disciplines in which it is used Thus, for example, many of the notions of gender difference deriving from ethnographic work with all-white samples in current circulation are reified and ethnocentric: the experiences of women of colour with the media remain unheard, unstudied, untheorized

Nevertheless, some recently published research by women of colour promises to change the way researchers consider media audiences. Jacqueline Bobo's work with black women's responses to the film *The Color Purple* has demonstrated how black women, because of their low expectations of the media (and their expectation of encountering racism) can read around and through a Hollywood text [18] Minu Lee and Chong Heup Cho's work with middle-class Korean soap opera fans in the United States similarly points to a much wider range of reactions and uses than has been imagined in theorizing the (white) spectator.[19] It can be predicted with certainty that other work by women of colour will not only alter the pool of empirical findings in cultural studies, but also challenge, redefine, and renovate the theoretical agenda in ways white academics cannot at present imagine. White researchers must work harder to consider the problems of racial and ethnic difference, scrutinize their research designs and their methods of contacting respondents, and bring to their work a high degree of selfconsciousness about racism and the power relations inherent in research

Ultimately, however, substantial improvement in the situation awaits bringing more women of colour into the field of cultural studies and its descriptions of media audiences. There is an unfortunate tendency to consider as a separate agenda – one set apart from theoretical work – issues of affirmative action, diversification of academic faculties, recruitment of students, and equitable entrance requirements. Experience also demonstrates that far too often graduate students of colour lack academic advisors who are strong advocates for them or for their course of study. It is no accident that there are few black, latino, native-born Asian and native American doctoral students or PhDs in the United States – and with numbers especially small in media studies Problems range from a curriculum and canon which are overwhelmingly white to a lack of precedent for students to do research relating to their experience – and a lack of encouragement from advisors [20] A rewriting of the canon and the curriculum must take into account popular films and television programmes, as well as independent and experimental work by black filmmakers. White feminists must recognize that, as an area of academic interest, feminist cultural

18 Jacqueline Bobo, *The Color Purple* black women as cultural readers' in E Deidre Pribram (ed), *Female Spectators Looking at Film and Television* (London Verso, 1988), pp 90–109

19 Minu Lee and Chong Heup Cho, 'Women watching together ethnographic study of Korean soap opera fans in the US', *Cultural Studies* vol 4, no 1 (1990) pp 30–44

20 For specific examples of this problem for students of colour in graduate programmes, see Yolanda T Moses, *Black Women in Academe Issues and Strategies* (Washington, DC Project on the Status and Education of Women/Association of American Colleges 1989) An especially frank and insightful look at the issue is given by Karen J Winkler, 'Minority students, professors tell of isolation anger in graduate school' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 November 1988 pp A15, A17

studies is likely to appear trivial to women of colour until white academics connect more strongly with the politics of the public sphere and the university.

The Women of Brewster Place

The Women of Brewster Place is the story of seven women who live in the rundown black neighbourhood of Brewster Place, located in an unnamed American city A brick wall at the end of the block, erected as a result of political and economic machinations, separates the residents from the rest of the world. It comes to stand for racism, and its effects are felt daily in the women's lives. Both Gloria Naylor's novel and the television programme are composed of six interconnected stories which detail the lives of seven women. This structure gives characters an individuality that rescues them from the fate of being viewed as anonymous 'female heads of households'. At the same time, according to Barbara Christian, the interrelationships of the women's lives is given full play, establishing '. . . Brewster Place as a community with its own mores, strengths and weaknesses'.[21]

21 Barbara Christian, 'Gloria Naylor's geography community, class, and patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* in Henry Louis Gates, Jr (ed) *Reading Black Reading Feminist* (New York Meridian 1990), p 353

The first and longest story follows Mattie Michael from her parents' home in the rural South, through her struggles to survive on her own in a northern city with her young son Basil and finally as a middle-aged woman forced to move to Brewster Place after losing her home to bailbondsmen when her son is accused of murder. Etta Mae Johnson is an ageing femme fatale who has existed by her ability to attach herself to successful men: she comes to live with her lifelong friend Mattie when she runs out of men to take care of her. Ciel, Mattie's 'adopted' daughter, lives a desperate life waiting for the father of her child to return after each of his abrupt departures: during an argument about his current exodus, their child accidentally dies. Kiswana Browne is a starry-eyed civil rights activist from a financially secure family, now living in Brewster Place because she feels the need to be close to 'the people'. She organizes the residents of the neighbourhood for a rent strike against the owners of the squalid buildings in which they live Cora Lee, the poorest and most isolated character, is a young woman with seven children her children are the terror of the neighbourhood and everyone tries to persuade her to stop having more Lorraine and Theresa have arrived in Brewster Place after living in other, better, neighbourhoods around the city. They have been forced to move on when the other residents have learned they are lesbians, because Lorraine is fearful she will lose her job as a schoolteacher. Theresa refuses to move again because, as she puts it, there is no place left to run; Brewster Place is the end of the line· she does not care how their neighbours on Brewster Place treat them Lorraine, on the

other hand, ostracized by her family and fired from a teaching job, yearns to be part of the community. She wants to be embraced within it, but encounters cruel rejection when she tries to participate in the newly-formed block organization. Alienated from the other women, Lorraine ventures out alone one night and is raped in an alley by a group of young black men (in the television version there is only one rapist).

The Women of Brewster Place was heavily promoted on US network television, on early morning talk shows, and in magazine articles about Oprah Winfrey, its prime mover, star and executive producer: it was only on Winfrey's insistence that ABC executives agreed to air the programme. In spite of all the advance publicity, it generated a conspicuous lack of critical attention Those publications which did review it made the now obligatory observation that the novel was yet another written by a black woman with an unflattering depiction of black men but even these comments lacked the fervour or bite of those directed against *The Color Purple*. More forceful were reviewers' complaints that the programme was simply a black soap opera, that it was formulaic melodrama at its worst, and that it had the look of a situation comedy.

Audience response, however, was phenomenal over its two-part broadcast the programme easily outdistanced competing offerings. Given the current decline in audience for network television, the Nielsen ratings (23.5/36 the first night; 24.5/38 the second) also indicate that people who normally do not watch network television tuned in specifically to watch this programme [22] The series was given a full rerun during prime time within a year of its original broadcast – a privilege reserved for only the most popular mini-series. A double VHS cassette of *The Women of Brewster Place* is currently available for rental in most large video stores in the United States

Although it has received little critical attention, *The Women of Brewster Place* was quite unlike anything on commercial network television in the US. This obviously had to do with the unique set of circumstances enabling its production: Oprah Winfrey has made productive use of her stardom as a talk show host to gain economic and creative control over her own television projects, which she sees through many different phases. (Winfrey has also been the subject of an extraordinary amount of negative publicity from many sources, from the *National Enquirer* to *The New York Times*, which cast her acquisition of production facilities, capital and so on in the melodramatic light of neurotic greed and obsession with power [23])

An additional element which helped distinguish *The Women of Brewster Place* was its maker, Donna Deitch, an independent director best known for the feature film *Desert Hearts* (1985), a lesbian love story Deitch produced *Desert Hearts* on a shoestring, and the film went on to enjoy a moderate success on the art cinema circuit in the United States. Deitch was probably selected to direct

22 These numbers represent the rating and share for the two nights the programme was broadcast This means that approximately forty-seven million viewers watched the programme the first night and approximately forty-nine million the second The share numbers indicate that more than one-third of the viewing audience was tuned in to *The Women of Brewster Place*

23 Barbara Grizzuti Harrison The importance of being Oprah *The New York Times Magazine* 11 June 1989 28–30

The Women of Brewster Place because of her past focus on relationships between women and her handling of the lesbian romance using the techniques of commercial mainstream cinema: it is in fact precisely on this point that Deitch has been criticized – for her prettification of the *Desert Hearts* story and its treatment as conventional Hollywood romance.[24] Deitch's work on *Brewster Place* could similarly be criticized for its glamorous visual treatment of the character Lorraine However, the television series, like the novel, does focus on the violence of homophobia and its far reaching and destructive effects on the everyday lives of the characters.

24 See the entry on Lesbian Independent Cinema', in Annette Kuhn (ed) *Women in Film An International Guide*

The selection of Deitch as director is noteworthy also in that it marks the first time a woman has directed a media adaptation of the work of a black woman author; a vastly more promising situation than Steven Spielberg's self-selection as director of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* Deitch and screenwriter Karen Hall said they attempted to remain very faithful to the original novel and to Naylor's vision of the lives of the black characters, in order to compensate for the fact that they themselves are white [25] Naylor herself, who lost control of the screen rights for the book in her publishing contract, had originally envisaged an adaptation of her novel for the non-commercial Public Broadcasting Service – circumstances which might have made more likely the hiring of a black woman as director. With the exception of Euzhan Palcy (*A Dry White Season*, 1989), no black women directors have succeeded in making commercial feature films in the US, although independent filmmakers such as Julie Dash, Debra Robinson and Zeinabu irene Davis, or television directors such as Caroll Parrott Blue, M. Neema Barnette and Debbie Allen certainly had the qualifications to take on such a project.

25 M A Gillespie, 'Winfrey takes all' *Ms* November 1988 pp 50–5

Significantly, the novel probes subject areas similar to those explored in other works from black women writers, such as Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and others, through the 1970s and 1980s A few of these topics – a sense of community, female bonding, overcoming adversity – are especially significant because they brought to the project elements not normally found in television plots. *The Women of Brewster Place* runs close to the codes of the television melodrama (especially of soap operas and made-for-television movies), but at the same time is very different. There are three notable features appearing in the television adaptation that the novel *The Women of Brewster Place* shares with other works by black women writers and which are critical to the present analysis an exploration of the sense of community among black women, an indictment of sexism, and an emphasis on the importance of black women supporting each other. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the black community is used for survival rather than individual advancement and upward mobility. Although the programme tells the story of seven women, the first and longest

story establishes Mattie Michael (the Oprah Winfrey character) as a pivotal figure – functioning much as the 'tentpole character' does in soap opera Mattie's story covers about eighteen years, beginning with her first and only pregnancy. Through good fortune, hard work and the friendship of an older woman, Mattie achieves one of her dreams of success: she becomes a home owner Miss Eva's and Mattie's house is represented neither as a cold and alienating bourgeois prison in the tradition of family melodrama on film (and of avant-garde feminist films such as *Jeanne Dielmann* [Chantal Akerman, 1975]), nor as the flimsy, obviously artificial, temporary set of American soap operas Rather, the characters' aspirations to the comforts and the aesthetics of cosy domestic space are dignified with many lingering takes of interiors in which an absence of dialogue focuses attention on the sounds and the rhythms of life within the home. These images contrast sharply with the cramped rooms without views on Brewster Place At the end of the first episode, Mattie loses the house when her son, on a murder charge, skips bail and disappears. The rest of the story traces Mattie's descent, her fall from economic grace and her arrival at Brewster Place. By the end of the programme, we realize that Mattie's personal fall has permitted her move into a nexus of women friends and neighbours, and thus the beginning of the community – troubled though it may be – of Brewster Place.

This is a strikingly different structure from that of most Hollywood film narratives, in which images of community are for the most part entirely lacking, and narrative conventions are typically based on the autonomous, unconnected individual [25] *The Women of Brewster Place*, though, does not offer a utopian image of community· poverty, violence, and bigotry are permanent features, and these are shown to deform personal relationships and threaten women Yet it contains striking instances of deeply held values that are starkly opposed to the values of the mainstream white culture and economy For example, after Mattie has left her rat-infested apartment and searched futilely for another place to live, she and her infant son are taken in by Miss Eva to share her home Miss Eva rejects the money that Mattie offers her for board, refusing to translate into market relations her gesture of help to a woman in need. Mattie, bewildered by this generosity, puts money in the cookie jar every week, but Miss Eva never takes it. Miss Eva shares all her material wealth and comfort with Mattie – literally a stranger off the street – without hesitation. It is almost impossible to conceive of this kind of act towards a person unrelated by blood in the universe of the white family melodrama. Miss Eva also shares her home with her granddaughter Ciel, and cares for and raises Mattie's son Basil just as though he were a member of her own family

A second feature *The Women of Brewster Place* shares with the

25 See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York Columbia University Press 1985)

work of other writers in its tradition is a scrutiny of sexism and of violence against black women by black men. Novels such as *Brown Girl Brownstones* (1959), *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* (1987) often explore the meaning of violence in everyday life, and the costs of survival. Their frank confrontation of incest, rape and wife- and child-beating has been the most controversial aspect of these works. Although there is an attempt to put sexism in the context of the continual humiliation of black men by white people and the desperation caused by the massive denial of economic opportunities, there is at the same time a vehement rejection of violence. For example, in the television version of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie's father, Sam, is played sympathetically by veteran black actor Paul Winfield. Dialogue stresses that Mattie is his pride and joy. Yet on discovering that Mattie is pregnant and will not reveal the name of the child's father, he explodes in a violent rage and beats her to the ground with a stick. In both novel and television programme, there is a graphic portrayal of the blows falling on her pregnant body. Mattie's mother (Mary Alice) a mild woman and devoted wife, picks up a rifle, points it at her husband and says: 'So help me Jesus, Sam, hit my child again and I'll meet your soul in hell!' Thus, while feelings of rage and frustration are acknowledged – in this case, a father's disappointment that his dreams for his daughter's future are ruined – the violence is uncompromisingly condemned.

All stills are from *The Women of Brewster Place*

In the face of both domestic violence and the multiple circumstances of oppression facing black women (the triple jeopardy of sex discrimination, race discrimination and poverty), the heroines of these novels by black women emerge as exceptionally strong and able to fight for survival. *The Women of Brewster Place*, like other novels by black women, offers distinctive portrayals of black women, in that these women fight back, get out, leave the abuse behind. They are usually assisted in this by another black woman. As Barbara Christian has argued, this process often involves a new feeling of self-worth and identity, forged through identification with another women.[27] In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the characters are paired in ways that reveal the tensions and contradictions of their positions: Mattie (celibate) and Etta Mae (lusty); Mattie (a single mother) and Ciel (struggling to keep her marriage together); Kiswana (privileged, single, do-gooder) and Cora Lee (poor, uneducated, mother of seven); Theresa (out as a lesbian) and Lorraine (in the closet to protect her job).

A third feature characteristic of much of black women's fiction, and which is developed in the television version of *The Women of Brewster Place*, with its reordering of the conventions of the television melodrama, is an exploration of a range of relationships between women: as friends, roommates, lovers, mothers and daughters. All these relationships take place outside of the nuclear

27 Barbara Christian, 'Trajectories of self-definition: placing contemporary Afro-American women's fiction', in Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (eds), *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 233–48.

family: Mattie and Ciel, for example, have one of the strongest bonds of love in the story, and they have adopted each other as mother and daughter, in much the same way Mattie and Miss Eva adopted one another. The white family melodrama has been preoccupied with ties of blood – the relentless interest in ascertaining paternity, for example, a staple of the woman's film and the soap opera – and with intense mother–daughter conflicts within the family. In novels in the black woman's writing tradition, these kinds of issues do not appear, and a more encompassing view of family takes their place.

Like *The Color Purple*, *The Women of Brewster Place* deals explicitly with sexual love between women. Its final story concerns Lorraine and Theresa, a middle-class couple who have just moved into the neighbourhood. The narrative explores in detail the persecution and hostility from black women and men that lesbians face. As in *The Color Purple*, *The Women of Brewster Place* places sexual love between women on a continuum of sexual experience which includes heterosexuality and celibacy. In a key scene towards the end of the television programme, Mattie and Etta Mae discuss the relationship of Lorraine and Theresa and the vicious gossip that is circulating about them. They have witnessed the disapproval of people in the neighbourhood, especially from a busybody named Miss Sophie. Miss Sophie senses before anyone else that there is 'something funny' going on between 'those two'. When she figures out what it is, she spreads the word 'like a scent', as it is described in the novel. While Mattie does Etta's hair, she is working through her own feelings about how 'the two' feel about each other. She asks Etta how 'they get that way' and if they are that way from birth. Etta says categorically that women like that are just different: 'they love each other the way you would a man'. Mattie, still uncertain, talks about her love for the women in her life, including her best friend Etta: 'Ornery as you can get, I've loved you practically all my life'. She tells Etta that she has loved some women more deeply than she has loved any man, 'and there have been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did'. There is a pause before Mattie finally adds 'maybe it's not so different. Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different at all'.

The idea of sisterhood as a sustaining element for black women has been discussed frequently in an abstract sense in political writing, but it became widely visible for the first time with the popularity of *The Color Purple*. For all the discussion about the novel and the film, one of the most enduring memories of that work is its portrait of the bonds that exist between the black women. In black women's writings there is a rich legacy of depictions of women supporting women: it is vividly portrayed in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Zora Neale Hurston's

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and more recently in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1972) and *Beloved* (1987). The novel *The Women of Brewster Place* looks at the ways in which black women support each other, and the potentially tragic repercussions when that support is lacking: Lorraine's rape occurs after she has been rejected from the community of Brewster Place. Gloria Naylor comments that her intent was to demonstrate how black people's survival depends on mutual support and that when this fails, the community can collapse.[28]

28 Quoted in William Goldstein, 'A talk with Gloria Naylor', *Publisher's Weekly*, 9 September 1983, pp. 35–6.

Barbara Christian argues that Naylor both acknowledges the remarkable achievements of writers such as Walker, Morrison and Marshall, and at the same time criticizes 'women-centered communities'. Along with a celebration of black women's survival instincts, Naylor feels that black women should also look towards political power. For although the community of Brewster Place holds its residents together for a time, at the end they are again displaced women.

> By presenting a community in which strong women-bonds do not break the cycle of powerlessness in which so many poor black women are imprisoned, Naylor points to a theoretical dilemma with which feminist thinkers have been wrestling. For while the values of nurturing and communality are central to a just society, they often preclude the type of behavior necessary to achieve power in this world, behavior such as competitiveness, extreme individualism, the desire to conquer. How does one break the cycle of powerlessness without giving up the values of caring so necessary to the achievement of a just society?[29]

29 Barbara Christian, 'Gloria Naylor's geography', p. 366.

Christian discusses two sections of Naylor's novel which offer resolutions to this question. The first is the dream-like sequence at the end of the book: in the novel, Lorraine's rape is followed by a subjective account of the thoughts, fears and nightmares, over an entire week, of each of the other women on the block. The women are haunted by the violence against another woman and their failure to stop it. After the week has passed, the block party takes place, and Mattie dreams that the women tear down the wall blocking the street as a protest against the forces that led to Lorraine's death. As Christian states: 'Even as the women in the final scene of the novel chip away at the wall that imprisons them, we are aware that this is someone's dream, for such an act would be the prelude to a community rebellion, a step these nurturing, restricted women cannot take if they are to survive as they have'.[30]

30 Ibid., p. 358.

Much of this subtlety is lost in the television version of the novel – indicating some of the limitations of the adaptation of literature to the small screen. In the television version, the action is compressed into a single night – in which Lorraine is raped during the block party and the women turn from discovery of the crime to an attempt

to tear down the wall. The final shots of the programme are medium shots of the women from the other side of the wall. Drenched by rain and flooded by coloured lights, they tear at the wall with their hands. The strange lights, the rain and the odd camera angle represent a complete stylistic break with what has gone before. But the tendency is to take the image literally rather than as suggesting a dream state; so that the women look bedraggled and desperate, their attempts to dismantle the wall pitiful and hysterical. Earlier, Mattie's first-person voice over had offered a reflection on the events of her life. In this final scene, however, there is no visual, active equivalent to her and the other women's earlier contemplative, intersubjective reactions. The women are not seen as reflecting on the violence; rather they erupt into a burst of collective action, puzzling in its futility, on the spot. A 'naturalistic' television style can render Naylor's symbolic action – the tearing down of a brick wall – only with great difficulty, and at the cost of a complete stylistic break.

The character Kiswana represents a second resolution to the question posed by Naylor about avenues to power for black women. Kiswana grew up in the upper-middle-class black neighbourhood of Linden Hills. The segment of the story devoted to Kiswana focuses on her psychological conflict with her mother and her struggle for a separate identity, placing her political activity in the light of youthful rebellion (a story familiar enough in the bourgeois family melodrama). This segment also establishes that, unlike the other women on Brewster Place, Kiswana lives there by choice and can leave whenever she wants to. It is her privileged background and the fact that she has other options that enable Kiswana to organize the residents as a united political entity to work against the landlord and the city government. As Christian aptly analyses the character, Kiswana is the only one of the women who can rebel because

> she does not risk survival, as the others would if they rebelled; nor has she yet been worn down by the unceasing cycle of displacement that the others have experienced. And she has a sense of how power operates *precisely* because she comes from Linden Hills, a place she leaves *precisely* because it is so focused on money and power.[31]

31 Ibid., p. 367.

As Naylor constructs a range of class positions for black women, from the impoverished Cora Lee to the privileged Kiswana, she presents the need for those who struggle for survival also to develop an ability to understand and use political power. This aspect of the novel is translated with some difficulty to television. Cora Lee is reduced to an object of Kiswana's reformist zeal – Kiswana wants to get Cora Lee and her children out to see her boyfriend's staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Cora Lee seems rather too easily converted, through her one-time exposure to black people

performing in a work of 'high art', into a better mother: tidying up her apartment, keeping the kids clean, encouraging them to work harder at school In the novel, Cora Lee's story is written from a point of view which allows her to react with silent suspicion and resentment to the intrusions of Kiswana, a single, middle-class woman who is unfamiliar with her problems. (This ambivalence towards Kiswana is expressed most strongly in the casting of Robin Givens, who had received a large amount of unfavourable publicity accusing her of opportunism in her marriage to boxing champion Mike Tyson Givens's performance is broader than that of most of the other main characters, being more in the style of the situation comedy *Head of the Class*, in which she had gained most of her previous screen experience)

In the novel, Cora Lee's segment is used as a sort of reverie on the sensual aspects of mothering infants· Cora Lee loves babies, but seems unable to understand children when they grow older and create responsibilities other than nurturing. Here, the juxtaposition of Cora Lee's sensuality with creative expression (the theatrical performance) appears to be a commentary on the consequences of oppression. But on television, where we are denied her account of her own childhood and her relationship with the men who 'give' her the adored babies, Cora Lee's characterization is rendered rather simplistically: she appears a creature of pure sensuality and a confused welfare recipient. She is never included in the community as an active member, and takes no part in the interplay of personal and public dramas in which the other characters are involved. In the novel, while the other women feel Cora Lee should stop having so many kids, she is still considered an integral part of the community.

Conclusion

As a novel and as a television programme, *The Women of Brewster Place* makes a strong contribution to black feminist thought as well as to feminist criticism in general Black feminist theory has criticized, corrected and improved the understanding of feminism put forward by white critics. Novels such as *The Women of Brewster Place*, as well as *The Color Purple*, have made an admirable attempt to dramatize into an explicitly feminist narrative black feminist commentary on the material, historical, social, economic and symbolic status of black women If the media versions fall short of the novels, their popularity with audiences – especially with black women – shows that much more work needs to be done by feminist critics on considerations of audience and on the analysis of all works by women of colour, in whatever medium

The Women of Brewster Place would make a productive addition to the canon of films by and about women represented in courses on

melodrama, women directors, and women's representation in film and television. As a popular work written by a black woman author, adapted for the screen by a white director and screenwriter, it opens up questions around the nature of women's experience and of differences stemming from race and class. The television version of *The Women of Brewster Place* in particular violates expectations about representations of black women long familiar from movies and television series Within the narrow range employed by the media in showing black women, three features are familiar: the black woman tends to be defined by a 'natural' connection to sexuality, by her relationship to white people as domestic servant, and by her role in the nuclear family as a domineering or restraining force. The television adaptation of *The Women of Brewster Place* situates its characters in ways that challenge, complicate and politicize our understanding of these types. As in the novel, it continually violates expectations of characters' sexuality: one of the most lascivious characters is Miss Eva, a woman in her seventies; one of the most glamorous is Lorraine, a lesbian The scarlet woman, Etta Mae, is perfectly happy to settle down with Mattie, her best friend. Mattie, who is involved in the programme's only extended love scene – a scene unusual for American television in its length and eroticism – remains celibate after her teenage pregnancy. As with the sexuality of all the characters, Mattie's celibacy is shown to be the result of a confluence of different factors – fatigue, limited time, fear of pregnancy, fear of men, lack of opportunity, enjoyment of motherhood. For each character there are costs as well as gains from the lifestyle she has adopted.

The maternal melodrama, which has inspired important critical work by white feminists such as Linda Williams and E. Ann Kaplan, takes on an entirely new aspect when considered in terms of black women's experiences with motherhood and childrearing. *The Women of Brewster Place*, which includes a number of figures who are strong black mothers, is careful to portray the crushing limitations these women face in daily life in a racist society and to investigate the hostility and resentment they incur from others who are threatened by their strength As such, it could usefully assume a place alongside films like *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) as a point of comparison and as a corrective, stemming largely from the insights of black feminist sociology, to the dominance of psychoanalysis as a critical method in film theory's treatment of the figure of the mother. Black feminist sociologists offer a perspective on black women's lives which has particular relevance for commentators on 'women's genres' In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the black mother's suffering cannot be located internally, because the role of the public sphere in determining the fate of mother and children is abundantly, incessantly, clear Patricia Hill

Collins notes that as black women researchers provide more information on the ways black women perceive their own mothering, a different view of motherhood emerges.[32] Black women are very connected to their biological children, as well as to those in their extended families and within the wider black community. They are also well aware of the choices available to them in 'historically-specific political economies'. Collins directs us to Janice Hale's work, which demonstrates that black mothers see their roles in part as intermediaries between their children and institutional intervention. As Collins puts it: 'Black mothers are sophisticated mediators between the competing offerings of an oppressive dominant culture and a nurturing Black value-structure' [33]

It can be seen, then, that a cultural product such as *The Women of Brewster Place* is dramatizing a psychological dynamic very different from that of the white family melodrama or soap opera. There is an emphasis on the process and survival of grief, on community and on family ties not defined exclusively by blood relation, and on women's lifelong friendships as a survival mechanism. All of these are issues missing from mainstream feminist considerations and prominent in the recent work of black feminist cultural critics There is a pressing need for feminist media critics to acquaint themselves with the work of black feminist theorists and creative writers, and to understand the relevance of this work to ongoing considerations of female representation, melodrama, and relations between domestic and public space. Here the work of black feminist literary critics, sociologists and historians may offer a better and richer perspective on media representations and the interplay of race and gender Finally, the creative work of black women writers, and the success of that work when adapted to small and large screens, can revitalize an interest among feminists in identifying and producing television and film which is both popular and politically challenging.

32 Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the outsider within the sociological significance of black feminist thought' *Social Problems*, vol 33, no 6 (1986) p 17

33 Collins's reference is to Janice Hale's 1980 work 'The black woman and child rearing', in LaFrances Rodgers-Rose (ed) *The Black Woman* (Beverly Hills, CA Sage 1980) pp 79–88

The pleasure of the interface

CLAUDIA SPRINGER

Sex times technology equals the future
J G. Ballard[1]

A discourse describing the union of humans and electronic technology currently circulates in the scientific community and in popular culture texts such as films, television, video games, magazines, cyberpunk fiction and comic books Much of the discourse represents the possibility of human fusion with computer technology in positive terms, conceiving of a hybrid computer/human that displays highly evolved intelligence and escapes the imperfections of the human body. And yet, while disparaging the imperfect human body, the discourse simultaneously uses language and imagery associated with the body and bodily functions to represent its vision of human/technological perfection. Computer technologies thus occupy a contradictory discursive position where they represent both escape from the physical body and fulfilment of erotic desire To quote science fiction author J G Ballard again·

> I believe that organic sex, body against body, skin area against skin area, is becoming no longer possible. . What we're getting is a whole new order of sexual fantasies, involving a different order of experiences, like car crashes, like traveling in jet aircraft, the whole overlay of new technologies, architecture, interior design, communications, transport, merchandising. These things are beginning to reach into our lives and change the interior design of our sexual fantasies.[2]

The language and imagery of technological bodies exist across a variety of diverse texts Scientists who are currently designing ways

1 J G Ballard, interviewed by Peter Linnett, *Corridor*, no 5 (1974), reprinted in *Re/Search* nos 8–9 (San Francisco Re/Search Publications, 1984) p 164

2 J G Ballard interviewed by Lynn Barber, *Penthouse* September 1970 reprinted in *Re/Search*, nos 8–9 p 157

to integrate human consciousness with computers (as opposed to creating Artificial Intelligence) describe a future in which human bodies will be obsolete, replaced by computers that retain human intelligence on software.[3] *Omni* magazine postulates a 'postbiological era'. The *Whole Earth Review* publishes a forum titled 'Is the body obsolete?' Jean-François Lyotard asks, 'Can thought go on without a body?'[4] Popular culture has appropriated the scientific project, but instead of effacing the human body, these texts intensify corporeality in their representation of cyborgs. A mostly technological system is represented as its opposite: a muscular human body with robotic parts that heighten physicality and sexuality. In other words, these contemporary texts represent a future where human bodies are on the verge of becoming obsolete but sexuality nevertheless prevails.

The contradictory discourse on cyborgs reveals a new manifestation of the simultaneous revulsion and fascination with the human body that has existed throughout the western cultural tradition. Ambivalence toward the body has traditionally been played out most explicitly in texts labelled pornographic, in which the construction of desire often depends upon an element of aversion. That which has been prohibited by censorship, for example, frequently becomes highly desirable. It was only in the nineteenth century, however, that pornography was introduced as a concept and a word, though its etymology dates back to the Greek *πορνογραφος*. writing about prostitutes. In his book *The Secret Museum*, Walter Kendrick argues that the signifier 'pornography' has never had a specific signified, but constitutes a shifting ideological framework that has been imposed on a variety of texts since its inception.[5] He suggests that after the years between 1966 and 1970 we entered a post-pornographic era heralded by the publication of *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*.[6] I would like to propose that if we are in a post-pornographic era, it is most aptly distinguished by the dispersion of sexual representation across boundaries that previously separated the organic from the technological. As Donna Haraway writes:

> Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.[7]

Sexual images of technology are by no means new. modernist texts in the early twentieth century frequently eroticized technology As K. C. D'Alessandro argues:

> Sexual metaphor in the description of locomotives, automobiles, pistons, and turbines; machine cults and the Futurist movement,

3 Hans Moravec director of the Mobile Robot Laboratory at Carnegie-Mellon University is at the forefront of cyborg development see his book *Mind Children The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge Harvard University Press 1988) For a journalistic account of Moravec s research projects and his concept of a cyborg future, see Grant Fjermedal *The Tomorrow Makers A Brave New World of Living-Brain Machines* (New York Macmillan, 1986)

4 Interview with Hans Moravec' *omni* vol 11, no 11 (1989), p 88, 'Is the body obsolete? A forum', *Whole Earth Review*, no 63 (1989) pp 34–55, Jean-François Lyotard, Can thought go on without a body? , *Discourse* vol 11, no 1 (1988–9) pp 74–87

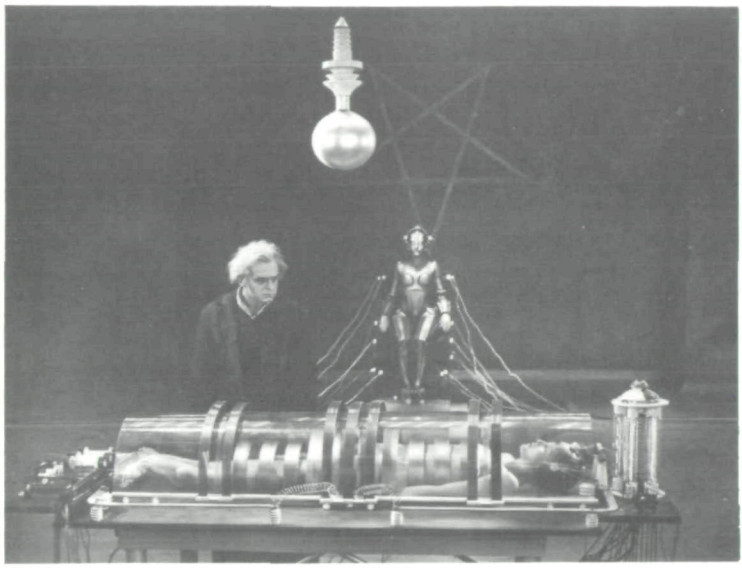
5 Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York Penguin Books 1987), p 31

6 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography *Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (Toronto, New York and London Bantam 1970) The Commission was established by the US Congress in October 1967 to define pornography' and obscenity' to determine the nature and extent of their distribution to study their effects upon the public, and to recommend legislative action The Commission s report did not define obscenity and pornography and stated that no empirical evidence existed to link criminal behaviour to sexually explicit material It also recommended against any legislative action and proposed that all existing prohibitive laws be repealed Soon after its release, the report was rejected by the US Senate and by President Nixon

7 Donna Haraway, 'A manifesto for cyborgs science technology and socialist feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review*, no 80 (1985) pp 65–107, reprinted in Elizabeth Weed (ed) *Coming to Terms Feminism Theory, and Practice* (New York Routledge 1989), pp 173–204 the quotation is from p 176

Man With a Movie Camera, and *Scorpio Rising* – these are some of the ways technophiliacs have expressed their passion for technology. For technophiliacs, technology provides an erotic thrill – control over massive power, which can itself be used to control others. . . . The physical manifestations of these machines – size, heft, shape, motions that thrust, pause and press again – represent human sexual responses on a grand scale. There is much to venerate in the technology of the Industrial age.[8]

8 K. C. D'Alessandro, 'Technophilia: cyberpunk and cinema', a paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies conference, Bozeman, Montana (July 1988), p. 1.



Metropolis
(Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

The film *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926) is a classic example of the early twentieth-century fascination with technology. It combines celebration of technological efficiency with fear of technology's power to destroy humanity by running out of control. This dual response is expressed by the film in sexual terms: a robot shaped like a human woman represents technology's simultaneous allure and powerful threat. The robot is distinguished by its overt sexuality, for it is its seductive manner that triggers a chaotic worker revolt. Andreas Huyssen argues that modernist texts tend to equate machines with women, displacing and projecting fears of overpowering technology onto patriarchal fears of female sexuality.[9] Huyssen contends that historically, technology was not always linked to female sexuality: the two became associated after the beginning of the nineteenth century just as machines came to be perceived as threatening entities capable of vast, uncontrollable destruction. In nineteenth-century literature, human life appears often to be vulnerable to the massive destructive potential of machines. Earlier, in the eighteenth century, before the Industrial Revolution installed machinery in the workplace on a grand scale, mechanization offered

9 Andreas Huyssen, 'The vamp and the machine: technology and sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*', *New German Critique*, nos 24–5 (1981–2), pp. 221–37.

merely a playful diversion in the form of the mechanical figures, designed to look male as often as female, that achieved great popularity in the European cities where they were displayed.[10]

Cyborgs, however, belong to the information age, where, as D'Alessandro writes, 'huge, thrusting machines have been replaced with the circuitry maze of the microchip, the minimal curve of aerodynamic design'.[11] Indeed, machines have been replaced by systems, and the microelectronic circuitry of computers bears little resemblance to the thrusting pistons and grinding gears that characterized industrial machinery D'Alessandro asks: 'What is sensual, erotic, or exciting about electronic tech?' She answers by suggesting that cybernetics makes possible the thrill of control over information and, for the corporate executives who own the technology, control over the consumer classes. What popular culture's cyborg imagery suggests is that electronic technology also makes possible the thrill of escape from the confines of the body and from the boundaries that have separated organic from inorganic matter.

While robots represent the acclaim and fear evoked by industrial age machines for their ability to function independently of humans, cyborgs incorporate rather than exclude humans, and in so doing erase the distinctions previously assumed to distinguish humanity from technology. Transgressed boundaries, in fact, define the cyborg, making it the consummate postmodern concept. When humans interface with computer technology in popular culture texts, the process consists of more than just adding external robotic prostheses to their bodies. It involves transforming the self into something entirely new, combining technological with human identity. Although human subjectivity is not lost in the process, it is significantly altered.

Rather than portraying human fusion with electronic technology as terrifying, popular culture frequently represents it as a pleasurable experience. The pleasure of the interface, in Lacanian terms, results from the computer's offer to lead us into a microelectronic Imaginary where our bodies are obliterated and our consciousness integrated into the matrix. The word matrix, in fact, originates in the Latin *mater* (meaning both mother and womb), and the first of its several definitions in *Websters* is 'something within which something else originates or develops'. Computers in popular culture's cyborg imagery extend to us the thrill of metaphoric escape into the comforting security of our mother's womb, which, as Freud explained, represents our earliest *Heim* (home).[12] According to Freud, when we have an *unheimlich* (uncanny) response to something, we are feeling the simultaneous attraction and dread evoked by the womb, where we experienced our earliest living moment at the same time that our insentience resembled death It was Freud's contention that we are constituted by a death wish as

10 Ibid p 226

11 D'Alessandro, 'Technophilia cyberpunk and cinema', p 1

12 Sigmund Freud 'The 'Uncanny'' (1919) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 17 trans and ed James Strachey (London The Hogarth Press, 1973), pp 219–52

well as by the pleasure principle; and popular culture's cyborg imagery effectively fuses the two desires.

Indeed, collapsing the boundary between what is human and what is technological is often represented as a sexual act in popular culture. By associating a deathlike loss of identity with sexuality, popular culture's cyborg imagery upholds a longstanding tradition of using loss of self as a metaphor for orgasm. It is well known that love and death are inextricably linked in the western cultural tradition, as Denis de Rougemont shows in his book *Love in the Western World*.[13] The equation of death with love has been accompanied in literature by the idea of bodiless sexuality: two united souls represent the purest form of romance. De Rougemont considers the Tristan legend to be western culture's paradigmatic romantic myth, from the twelfth century into the twentieth century; and it persists in the late twentieth century in cyborg imagery that associates the human/computer interface with sexual pleasure.

13 Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

Instead of losing our consciousness and experiencing bodily pleasures, cyborg imagery in popular culture invites us to experience

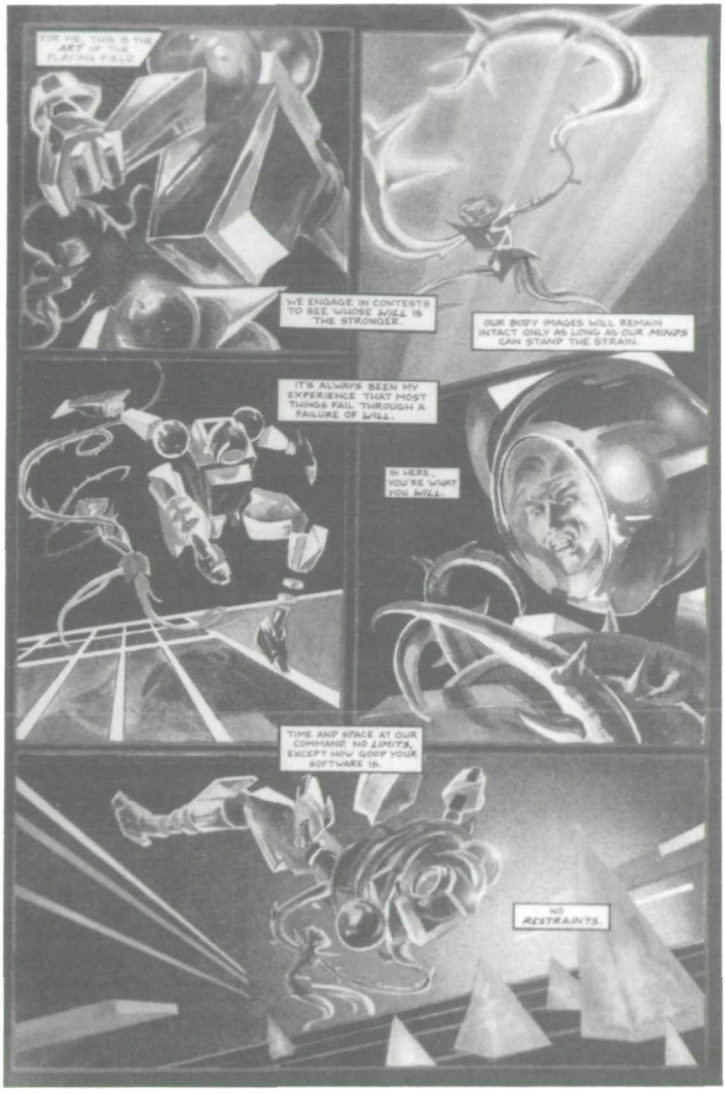
Cyberpunk
(Courtesy of the Innovative Corporation, Scott Rockwell and Darryl Banks)

sexuality by losing our bodies and becoming pure consciousness. One of many examples is provided by the comic book *Cyberpunk*,[14] whose protagonist, Topo, mentally enters the 'Playing Field' – a consensual hallucination where all the world's data exists in three-dimensional abstraction (called cyberspace in the cyberpunk novels of William Gibson) – saying 'it's the most beautiful thing in the human universe If I could leave my meat behind and just live here. If I could just be pure consciousness I could be happy.' While in the Playing Field he meets Neon Rose, a plant/woman with a rose for a head and two thorny tendrils for arms (and like Topo, only present through hallucination). Even her name inscribes the collapse of boundaries between organic plant life and a technological construct. He engages her in a contest of wills, represented as their bodies entwined around each other while he narrates: 'In here, you're what you will. Time and space at our command. No limits, except how good your software is. No restraints.' Topo's spoken desire – to leave his meat behind and become pure consciousness, which is in fact what he has done – is contradicted by the imagery his body – his meat – wrapped around another body

The word 'meat' is widely used to refer to the human body in cyberpunk texts. Cyberpunk, a movement in science fiction dating from the early 1980s, combines an aggressive punk sensibility rooted in urban street culture with a highly technological future where distinctions between technology and humanity have dissolved In this context, 'meat' typically carries a negative connotation along with its conventional association with the penis. It is an insult to be called meat in these texts, and to be meat is to be vulnerable. And yet despite its aversion to meat, *Cyberpunk* visually depicts Topo's body after he has abandoned it to float through the Playing Field's ever-changing topography. His body, however, only seems to be inside the Playing Field because of an illusion, and he is capable of transforming it in any way he desires As he sees Neon Rose approach, he transforms himself into mechanical parts shaped like his own human body, but more formidable He has lost his flesh and become steel. Only his face remains unchanged, and it is protected by a helmet. Topo's new powerful body, a product of his fantasy, inscribes the conventional signifiers of masculinity he is angular with broad shoulders and chest; and, most importantly, he is hard. It is no accident that he adopts this appearance in order to greet Neon Rose, who is coded in stereotypical feminine fashion as a sinewy plant who throws her tendrils like lassos to wrap them around him In case the reader is still in doubt about Neon Rose's gender, *Cyberpunk* shows her as a human woman after Topo defeats her in their mock battle.

This example from *Cyberpunk* indicates that while popular culture texts enthusiastically explore boundary breakdowns between humans and computers, gender boundaries are treated less flexibly

14 Scott Rockwell *Cyberpunk*, book one vol 1, no 1 (Wheeling, West Virginia Innovative Corporation, 1989)



Cyberpunk
(Courtesy of the Innovative Corporation, Scott Rockwell and Darryl Banks)

Cyberbodies, in fact, tend to appear masculine or feminine to an exaggerated degree. We find giant pumped-up pectoral muscles on the males and enormous breasts on the females; or, in the case of Neon Rose, cliched flower imagery meant to represent female consciousness adrift in the computer matrix. Cyborg imagery has not so far realized the ungendered ideal theorized by Donna Haraway.[15] Haraway praises the cyborg as a potentially liberatory concept, one that could release women from their inequality under patriarchy by making genders obsolete. When gender difference ceases to be an issue, she explains, then equality becomes possible. Janet Bergstrom points out that exaggerated genders dominate in science fiction because

15 Haraway, 'A manifesto for cyborgs'.

where the basic fact of identity as a human is suspect and subject to transformation into its opposite, the representation of sexual identity carries a potentially heightened significance, because it can be used as the primary marker of difference in a world otherwise beyond our norms.[16]

16 Janet Bergstrom Androids and androgyny *Camera Obscura*, no 15 (1986), p 39

In heightening gender difference, popular culture's cyborg imagery has not caught up with scientist Hans Moravec, who tells us that there will be no genders in the mobile computers that will retain human mental functions on software once the human body has become obsolete: 'not unless for some theatrical reason. I expect there'll be play, which will be just another kind of simulation, and play may include costume parties.'[17] According to Lyotard, on the other hand, the most complex and transcendent thought is made possible by the force of desire, and therefore 'thinking machines will have to be nourished not just on radiation but on irremediable gender difference'.[18]

17 Interview with Hans Moravec', p 88

18 Lyotard Can thought go on without a body? p 86

Jean Baudrillard takes a similar position when he suggests that its inability to feel pleasure makes Artificial Intelligence incapable of replicating human intelligence.[19] But Baudrillard, unlike Lyotard, does not insist that gender difference is indispensable. Instead, he sees the collapse of clear boundaries between humans and machines as part of the same postmodern move toward uncertainty that characterizes the collapse of difference between genders. Baudrillard asserts that 'science has anticipated this panic-like situation of uncertainty by making a principle of it'.[20] Indeed, uncertainty is a central characteristic of postmodernism and the essence of the cyborg. But since most cyborgs in popular culture exhibit definite gender difference, it is apparent that, despite its willingness to relinquish other previously sacrosanct categories, patriarchy continues to uphold gender difference.

19 Jean Baudrillard, *Xerox and Infinity* trans Agitac (Paris Touchepas 1988), p 3

20 Ibid p 16

Despite the fact that cyborg imagery in popular culture often exaggerates conventional gender difference, however, it does not always conform entirely to traditional sexual representations. Contrary to the way most sexual imagery has been designed for a male gaze and has privileged heterosexual encounters, cyborg imagery, taken as a whole, implies a wider range of sexualities. Erotic interfacing is, after all, purely mental and nonphysical; it theoretically allows a free play of imagination. Accordingly, not all cyborg imagery adheres strictly to the standardized male fantasies celebrated in *Playboy* Nor does it simply posit the computer as female in the manner that *Metropolis* associates technology with female sexuality and represents men as vulnerable to both. Instead, computers in popular culture's cyborg imagery represent sexual release of various kinds for both genders

In some examples, the act of interfacing with a computer matrix is acknowledged to be solitary, but it is nonetheless represented as a

sexual act, a masturbatory fantasy expressed in terms of entering something, but lacking the presence of another human body or mind. In the comic book *Interface*, the interfacing experience of a woman named Linda Williams is coded as masturbation, which becomes linked to the process of thinking.[21] Williams is seen from a high angle lying on her bed on her back, saying, 'I relax my body. My mind starts to caress the frequencies around me. There. That's better. I'm one with the super-spectrum now. I'm interfaced with the world.' In the last panel, she is seen doubled, her second self rising nude from the bed with head thrown back and arms outstretched in a sexual pose.

21 James D. Hudnall, *Interface*, vol. 1, no. 1 (New York: Epic Comics, 1989).

Interface
(Courtesy of James D. Hudnall and Paul Johnson)

Linda Williams's mental journey through the computer matrix in search of valuable files is drawn so as to show her nude body diving through oceans of electronic circuitry and a jumble of cliched newspaper headlines. Although female masturbation is a staple of conventional pornography for a male spectator, Williams's interface/masturbation is drawn differently from the pornographic norm: her body is ghostly white and in constant motion as she swoops through the matrix surrounded by a watery mist. In two panels, her body is merely an indistinct blur. Its activity distinguishes her from the conventional passive female object of pornography, and her masturbation is not a prelude to heterosexual sex. Later in the evening, after she has returned from the matrix (sighing, 'coming down from the interface makes me feel dizzy') and is once again fully clothed, she rejects the sexual advances of a male character. She tells him, 'I need some time to myself right now.' When he tries to persuade her, she responds, 'Not tonight. I know you were expecting me to sleep with you, to make you want to stay. But I don't do that sort of thing. Look, I'm attracted to you. So maybe you'll get lucky sometime. Right now, I've got a lot on my mind. There's so much I have to think about.' Williams takes control over her own sexuality, which embodies the cyborgian condition as represented in popular culture by being purely cerebral and simultaneously sexual. When she says she wants to be alone because there is so much she has to think about, the reader may infer that her private thoughts will be expressed sexually, as they were when she mentally entered the computer matrix.

Imaginary sex – sex without physically touching another human – prevails in cyborg discourses, though bodily sex is not altogether absent. The emphasis on cerebral sexuality suggests that while pain is a meat thing, sex is not. Historical, economic, and cultural conditions have facilitated human isolation and the evolution of cerebral sex. Capitalism has always separated people from one another with its ideology of rugged individualism. Its primary form of sanctioned unity – the nuclear family – has traditionally decreed that one person, usually the woman, relinquish her individuality in order to support in the private realm the public endeavours of the other. Public relations under capitalism are characterized by competition and its attendant suspicions. In late capitalism, social relations are mediated not only by money, but also by the media with its simulations. Rather than communicate, we spectate. Computer technology offers greater opportunities for dialogue – through modem hookup and electronic mail, for example – than does television, and can be thought of as a way to reestablish the human contact that was lost during the television decades. It is hardly astonishing that, at a time when paranoia over human contact in response to the AIDS virus is common, human interaction should occur through computerized communication, with the participants

far apart and unable to touch each other

To say that people communicate via their computers is not to say that the act of communication has remained unchanged from the pre-computer era The term 'communication' is in fact imprecise, according to Baudrillard He writes that in the interface with the computer

> the Other, the sexual or cognitive interlocuter, is never really aimed at – crossing the screen evokes the crossing of the mirror. The screen itself is targeted as the point of interface The machine (the interactive screen) transforms the process of communication, the relation from one to the other, into a process of commutation, i.e. the process of reversability from the same to the same. The secret of the interface is that the Other is within it virtually the Same – otherness being surreptitiously confiscated by the machine [22]

22 Baudrillard *Xerox and Infinity* pp 5–6

Although the computer invites us to discard our identities and embrace an Imaginary unity, like a mirror it also reminds us of our presence by displaying our words back to us. What Baudrillard argues is that this intensely private experience precludes actual interaction with another person and turns all computerized communication into a kind of autocommunication which may contain elements of autoeroticism.

In an example of solitary sexual communion with technology, William Gibson, one of the founding authors of cyberpunk fiction, uses the term 'jack in' in his writing to describe the moment when a 'cowboy' sitting at a 'deck' enters his command to be mentally transported into cyberspace he wanted to title his first novel 'Jacked In', but the publisher refused on the grounds that it sounded too much like 'Jacked Off' [23] Gibson's trilogy – *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* – evokes a dystopian future where isolated individuals drift in and out of each others' lives and often escape into fantasy.[24] Not unlike television's mass-produced fantasies of today, Gibson's 'simstim' (simulated stimulation) feeds entertaining narratives directly into people's minds Cyberspace, too, is a place of the mind, but it feels like three-dimensional space to those who enter it

23 William Gibson and Timothy Leary in conversation 'High tech/high life *Mondo 2000*, no 1 (Berkeley CA Fun City Megamedia 1989) p 61

24 William Gibson *Neuromancer* (New York Ace Books 1984) *Count Zero* (New York Ace Books 1986) *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (New York Bantam Books 1988)

> Cyberspace A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding [25]

25 Gibson *Neuromancer* p 51

Gibson's evocation of cyberspace has influenced the way people think about Virtual Reality, a concept dating back to the late 1960s

which has become fashionable in the 1990s, receiving widespread media coverage while several companies develop its capabilities and design marketing strategies. Virtual Reality creates a computer-generated space that a person perceives as three-dimensional through goggles fitted with small video monitors. Gloves connected to the computer allow users to interact with the space and feel as though they are performing such activities as picking up objects, driving or flying. It would be inappropriate to call Virtual Reality an escape from reality, since what it does is provide an alternative reality where 'being' somewhere does not require physical presence and 'doing' something does not result in any changes in the physical world. Virtual Reality undermines certainty over the term reality, ultimately abandoning it altogether along with all the other certainties that have been discarded in postmodern times. John Perry Barlow, who writes about the cyberworld and is cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (an organization that tries to protect those working in electronic communications from governmental repression), calls Virtual Reality 'a Disneyland for epistemologists', declaring that it will 'further expose the conceit that "reality" is a fact . . . delivering another major hit to the old fraud of objectivity'.[26]

In published descriptions of Virtual Reality there are frequent references to its erotic potential. One concept in the works is 'teledildonics', which puts the user in a bodysuit lined with tiny vibrators.[27] The user would telephone others who are similarly outfitted. Their telephone conversations would be accompanied by computerized visual representations, displayed to them on headsets, of their bodies engaged in sexual activities. As Howard Rheingold, author of the book *Virtual Reality*,[28] points out, teledildonics would revolutionize sexual encounters as well as our definitions of self:

> Clearly we are on the verge of a whole new semiotics of mating. Privacy and identity and intimacy will become tightly coupled into something we don't have a name for yet. What happens to the self? Where does identity lie? And with our information-machines so deeply intertwingled [sic] with our bodily sensations, as Ted Nelson might say, will our communication devices be regarded as 'its' . . or will they be part of 'us'?[29]

Confusion over the boundaries between the self and technological systems is already evident. Virtual Reality, according to some of its proponents, will be able to eliminate the interface, the 'mind-machine information barrier'.[30] According to Baudrillard, uncertainty over the boundary between humanity and technology originates in our relationship to the new technological systems, not to traditional machines.

Am I a man, am I a machine? In the relationship between

26 John Perry Barlow, 'Being in nothingness', *Mondo 2000* no 2 (Berkeley CA: Fun City Megamedia, 1990), pp 39–41

27 Howard Rheingold, 'Teledildonics: reach out and touch someone', *Mondo 2000*, no 2 (Berkeley CA: Fun City Megamedia, 1990), pp 52–4

28 Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991)

29 Rheingold, 'Teledildonics', p 54

30 Barlow, 'Being in nothingness', p 38

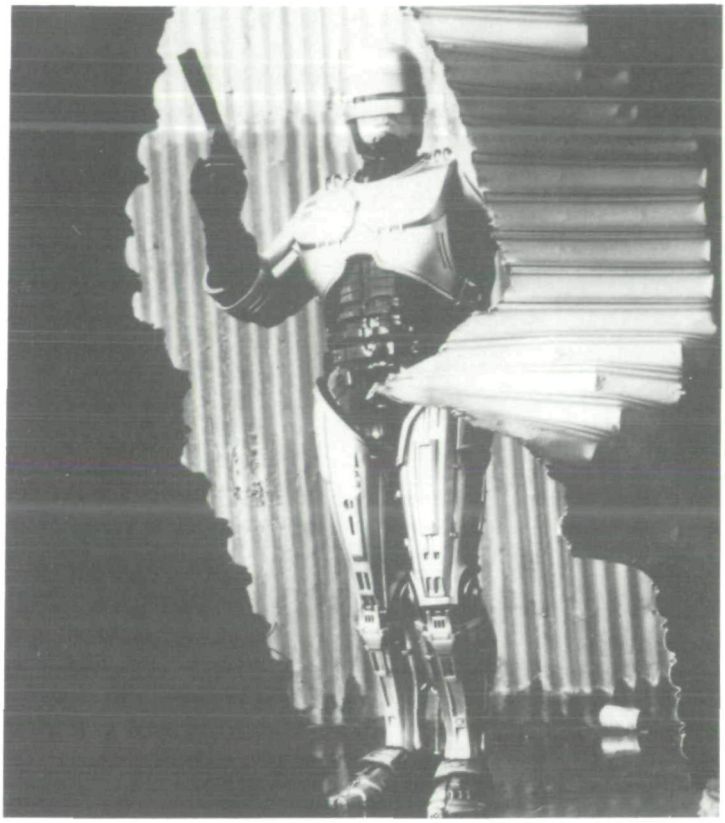
> workers and traditional machines, there is no ambiguity whatsoever. The worker is always estranged from the machine, and is therefore alienated by it. He keeps his precious quality of alienated man to himself Whilst new technology, new machines, new images, interactive screens, do not alienate me at all. With me they form an integrated circuit.[31]

31 Baudrillard *Xerox and Infinity*, p 14

Nowhere is the confusion of boundaries between humanity and electronic technology more apparent than in films involving cyborg imagery: here cyborgs are often indistinguishable from humans. The Terminator (*The Terminator* [James Cameron, 1984]), for example, can be recognized as nonhuman only by dogs, not by humans. Even when cyborgs in films look different from humans, they are often represented as fundamentally human In *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), Robocop is created by fusing electronic technology and robotic prostheses with the face of a policeman, Alex J. Murphy, after he has died from multiple gunshot wounds He clearly looks technological, while at the same time he retains a human shape. His most recognizably human feature is his face, with its flesh still intact, while the rest of his body is entirely constructed of metal and electronic circuitry The film shows that despite his creators' attempts to fashion him into a purely mechanical tool, his humanity keeps surfacing He seeks information about Murphy, his human precursor, and increasingly identifies with him, particularly since he retains memories of the attack that killed Murphy At the end of the film, Robocop identifies himself, when asked for his name, as Murphy. In the sequel, *Robocop II* (Irvin Kershner, 1990), Robocop's basic humanity is further confirmed when he is continually stirred by memories of Murphy's wife and young son, and takes to watching them from the street outside their new home Robocop's inability to act on his human desires constitutes the tragic theme of the film, which takes for granted that Robocop is basically human.

If there is a single feature that consistently separates cyborgs from humans in these films, it is the cyborg's greater capacity for violence, combined with enormous physical prowess Instead of representing cyborgs as intellectual wizards whose bodies have withered away and been replaced by computer terminals, popular culture gives us muscular hulks distinguished by their superior fighting skills To some extent the phenomenon of the rampaging cyborg in films suggests a residual fear of technology of the sort that found similar expression in older films like *Metropolis*. Electronic technology's incredible capabilities can certainly evoke fear and awe, which can be translated in fictional representation into massive bodies that overpower human characters

But fear of the computer's abilities does not entirely explain why cyborgs are consistently associated with violence Significantly,



Robocop
(Courtesy of the Rank Organization plc, Orion Pictures International and BFI stills archive)

musclebound cyborgs in films are informed by a tradition of muscular comic-book superheroes; and, like the superheroes, their erotic appeal lies in the promise of power they embody. Their heightened physicality culminates not in sexual climax but in acts of violence. Violence substitutes for sexual release. Steve Neale has theorized that violence displaces male sexuality in films in response to a cultural taboo against a homoerotic gaze.[32] Certain narrative films continue to be made for a presumed male audience, and homophobia exerts a strong influence on cinematic techniques. For example, closeup shots that caress the male body on screen might encourage a homoerotic response from the male spectator. But, as Neale explains, the spectacle of a passive and desirable male body is typically undermined by the narrative, which intervenes to make him the object or the perpetrator of violence, thereby justifying the camera's objectification of his body.

In the opening sequence of *The Terminator*, for example, the shot of the cyborg's (Arnold Schwarzenegger) beautifully sculpted nude body standing on a hill above night-time Los Angeles, city lights twinkling like ornaments behind him, is quickly followed by his bloody attack on three punk youths in order to steal their clothes.

32 Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle: reflections on men and mainstream cinema', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), pp. 2–16.

His attire then consists of hard leather and metal studs, concealing his flesh and giving his sexuality a veneer of violence. As in similar examples from other films, an invitation to the spectator to admire the beauty of a male body is followed by the body's participation in violence. The male body is restored to action to deny its status as passive object of desire, and the camera's scrutiny of the body receives narrative justification.

Klaus Theweleit, in his two-volume study of fascist soldier males (specifically, men of the German *Freikorps* between the world wars), writes that their psychological state indicates an intense misogyny and an overwhelming desire to maintain a sense of self in the face of anything they perceive might threaten their bodily boundaries.[33] Theweleit draws on the theories of psychologist Margaret Mahler to argue that fascist males have never developed an identity (they are 'not-yet-fully-born'), and thus invest all of their energies into maintaining a fragile edifice of selfhood. Their failure to disengage from their mothers during infancy results in a fear that women will dissolve their identities; hence the frequency with which women are associated in fascist rhetoric with raging floods that threaten to engulf their victims. In order to protect themselves from women, onto whom they project the watery weakness they despise in themselves, fascist males encase themselves in body armour, both literally and figuratively The machine body becomes the ideal tool for ego maintenance

33 Klaus Theweleit *Male Fantasies*, vol 1 (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 1987), *Male Fantasies* vol 2 (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 1989)

For the fascist male, additionally, the sexual act evokes loss of self and becomes displaced onto violence. The act of killing, especially by beating the victim into a bloody pulp, functions to externalize the dissolution of self that he fears, and assures him of his relative solidity. He reaffirms his physical and psychological coherence every time he kills Acts of violence also serve to release some of his enormous tension, for the task of maintaining a sense of self when a self barely exists is excruciating, and the soldier male does not allow himself to experience release through sexual union. As Theweleit writes, 'heroic acts of killing take the place of the sexual act', and the ecstasy of killing substitutes for sexual climax [34]

34 Theweleit *Male Fantasies* vol 2, pp 276 279

Cyborg imagery in films is remarkably consistent with Theweleit's description of the fascist soldier male. If anything, cyborg imagery epitomizes the fascist ideal of an invincible armoured fighting machine In *Robocop*, Robocop's armour is external and protects him from gunshots and other assaults that would kill a human. He strides fearlessly into a blaze of gunfire as bullets bounce off his armoured body. In *The Terminator*, the cyborg's armour is inside his body and therefore not visible, but it makes him virtually indestructible Near the end of the film, after the Terminator's flesh has been burnt away, he is revealed to be a metal construct that, despite the loss of all its flesh, continues methodically to stalk its victim

Cyborg imagery, therefore, represents more than just a recognition that humanity has already become integrated with technology to the point of indistinguishability; it also reveals an intense crisis in the construction of masculinity. Shoring up the masculine subject against the onslaught of a femininity feared by patriarchy now involves transforming the male body into something only minimally human Whereas traditional constructions of masculinity in film often relied on external technological props (guns, armoured costumes, motorcycles, fast cars, cameras, and so on)[35] to defend against disintegration, the cinematic cyborg heralds the fusion of the body with the technological prop.

Ironically, the attempt to preserve the masculine subject as a cyborg requires destroying the coherence of the male body and replacing it with electronic parts; either physically – using hardware, or psychologically – using software. The construction of masculinity as cyborg requires its simultaneous deconstruction. And yet, by escaping from its close identification with the male body, masculine subjectivity has been reconstituted, suggesting that there is an essential masculinity that transcends bodily presence In a world without human bodies, the films tell us, technological things will be gendered and there will still be a patriarchal hierarchy What this reconfiguration of masculinity indicates is that patriarchy is more willing to dispense with human life than with male superiority.

However, the sacrifice of the male body is disguised in cyborg films by emphasizing physicality and intensifying gender difference Pumping up the cyborg into an exaggerated version of the muscular male physique hides the fact that electronic technology has no gender In *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), for example, the fact that Doug Quaid's identity is merely an electronic implant is counteracted by his massive physical presence, once again made possible by casting Arnold Schwarzenegger in the role of Quaid Muscular cyborgs in films thus assert and simultaneously disguise the dispersion of masculine subjectivity beyond the male body

The paradox that preserving masculine subjectivity in the figure of the cyborg requires destroying the male body accounts in part for the extreme violence associated with cyborgs in films they represent an impossible desire for strength through disintegration, and, like the fascist soldier males, their frustration finds expression in killing The Terminator, for example, is programmed to kill and in fact has no other function than to kill humans. He has been sent into the past by his machine masters expressly to kill a young woman, Sarah Connor. His adversary Kyle Reese tells Connor that the Terminator 'can't be bargained with, it can't be reasoned with, it doesn't feel pity or remorse or fear and it absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead', recalling Theweleit's observation that the fascist soldier male has no moral qualms about killing.

Robocop is also an expert killer, but the two *Robocop* films,

35 For a discussion of how constructions of the masculine subject have relied on technological props, see Sabrina Barton, 'The apparatus of masculinity in *Shane* and *Sex Lies, and Videotape*', a paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference, Washington DC (May 1990) Constance Penley, 'Feminism film theory and the bachelor machines' *The Future of an Illusion Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 1989), chapter 4 In the context of the war film, see Susan Jeffords *Remasculinization of America Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington Indiana University Press 1989)

unlike *The Terminator*, justify the hero's acts of killing by putting him on the side of law enforcement and showing his victims caught in the act of committing crimes In *Robocop II*, Robocop is programmed to apprehend criminals without killing them by a smarmy woman psychologist who preaches nonviolence and is made to appear ridiculous. The film indicates, however, that the software program that prevents Robocop from killing hinders his effectiveness; and the film celebrates his acts of killing when he manages to overcome the restraining program. In *Total Recall*, Doug Quaid is attacked nearly every time he turns a corner, and he responds by killing all of his attackers with a show of incredible strength and brutality.

Not only does cyborg imagery in films extol the human killing machine, it also expresses the concomitant fear of sexuality theorized by Theweleit. In the film *Hardware* (Richard Stanley, 1990), for example, the cyborg is dormant until activated by the sight of a young woman, Jill, having sex with her boyfriend After the boyfriend has left the apartment and Jill has hung the cyborg on the wall as part of a scrap metal sculpture, the cyborg watches her sleeping body for a while and then emerges to attack her; for, like the Terminator, it has been created to destroy humans.

Sexuality is feared by fascist soldier males not only because it signifies loss of personal boundaries, writes Theweleit, but also because sexuality evokes the creation of life, and the soldier male is bent on destroying all signs of life before they can destroy him Pregnant women, according to Theweleit, are treated with revulsion in his rhetoric. Like fascist soldier males, cyborgs in films are often determined to prevent birth. In *Hardware*, it turns out that the cyborg that kills all the life forms it encounters is a secret weapon in the government's birth control programme The Terminator, likewise, has been programmed to travel back through time to kill Sarah Connor in order to prevent her giving birth to her son John, who, forty years into the future, will lead the few humans who have survived a nuclear war in defeating the machines that threaten humanity with annihilation.

Creation versus destruction of life is not only a central thematic concern but also a site of dispute in cyborg texts. The ability to engender life is divided between men and women and between humans and technology. Women are typically associated with biological reproduction while men are involved in technological reproduction In the film *Demon Seed* (Donald Cammell, 1977), for example, a scientist creates an Artificial Intelligence in a sophisticated computer laboratory where teams of specialists educate their artificial child The scientist's wife, Susan (Julie Christie), is a psychiatrist, a member of a humanistic profession that opposes her husband's technophilia. She complains about his emotional coldness, illustrating the film's stereotypically phallocentric definition of

gender roles: men are scientific and aloof while women are humanistic and emotional

Demon Seed reinforces its version of gender difference by taking for granted that the AI, a form of pure consciousness, is male. Masculine subjectivity has dispensed entirely with the need to construct a body in this film, existing instead as bodiless intellect. And the woman's role is even further confined when Susan is raped by the AI, whose pure intellect is the antithesis of Susan's reduction to a reproductive vessel. Since the Artifical Intelligence has no physical form (its name is Proteus IV, after the Greek sea god capable of assuming different forms), it relies on a robot and a giant mutating geometric shape under its command to rape Susan Its orgasm while impregnating her is represented as a trip into the far reaches of the cosmos ('I'll show you things only I have seen', it tells her) Motivated by a desire to produce a child and thereby experience emotions and physical sensations, the AI attempts to take control over the reproductive process, in effect vying with Susan's husband for power over creation, but going back to a biological definition of reproduction and a phallocentric definition of woman as childbearer Susan is a mere womb in the AI's scheme When the film ends with the birth of the child conceived by the AI and Susan, it leaves ambiguous whether the cyborg child, a union of a disembodied intellect and a human woman, will be demonic or benign

Men are also the creators of life in *Weird Science* (John Hughes, 1985), a throwback to *Metropolis* with its representation of a woman artificially designed to fulfil a male fantasy. Two unpopular high school boys program a computer to create their perfect woman, assembled from fragmented body parts selected from *Playboy* magazines. Her role, like the robot's in *Metropolis*, at first appears to be sexual· the boys' initial desire is to take a shower with her Also as in *Metropolis*, the woman's sexuality is too powerful for the boys who are incapable of doing more than just kissing her However, unlike *Metropolis*, she takes on a big sisterly role that involves instructing her creators in the finer points of talking to girls Her guidance boosts their self-confidence and allows them to win over the two most popular high school girls, whom earlier they could only admire from afar. The film uses the concept of computer-generated life only to further its conventional coming-of-age narrative, and does nothing to question either gender roles or the implications of nonbiological reproduction.

Eve of Destruction (Duncan Gibbins, 1991) complicates the theme of creation versus destruction, but only to punish the woman protagonist for her sexuality and for engaging in technological rather than biological reproduction A scientist named Eve creates a cyborg, also named Eve, who looks exactly like her and is programmed with her memories. The cyborg escapes from the

scientist and goes on a killing spree. Rather than engaging in random destruction, however, the cyborg Eve lives out the scientist Eve's repressed fantasies of sex and revenge against men. Thus the cyborg kills the scientist's father, whom the scientist has hated since childhood because he brutalized and caused the death of her mother. The cyborg's first victim is a redneck at a country saloon that the scientist had fantasized frequenting for casual sex. The cyborg takes the man to a motel room and, when he taunts her with his erection, bites his penis.

The film's castration anxiety escalates, for it turns out that the cyborg has something much more dangerous than a vagina dentata: a nuclear vagina. We learn that the Defense Department funded the cyborg project to create a secret military weapon, complete with nuclear capabilities. In a computer graphics display of the cyborg's design, we see that the nuclear explosive is located at the end of a tunnel inside her vagina. Sure enough, the countdown to a nuclear explosion begins when the cyborg has an orgasm as she destroys another man by crashing her car into his. Patriarchal fear of female sexuality has clearly raised the stakes since the 1920s when *Metropolis* showed unleashed female sexuality leading to the collapse of a city. *Eve of Destruction* puts the entire planet at risk.

Having established that female sexuality leads to uncontrollable destruction, the film suggests that what the scientist placed in danger by creating artificial life was her role as biological mother: for the cyborg kidnaps the scientist's young son. Only then does the scientist cooperate with the military officer whose job it is to destroy the cyborg before it detonates. Earlier, they had an antagonistic relationship revolving around contempt for each other's profession. His attempts to destroy her cool professional demeanour finally succeed, and at the end it is she who destroys the cyborg only seconds before zero hour in order to save the lives of her son and the military officer. The scientist in effect destroys her repressed sexuality and anger towards men, and accepts her primary status as biological mother.

As *Eve of Destruction* illustrates, artificial life in films continues, in the Frankenstein tradition, to threaten the lives of its creators, but it also continues to hold out the promise of immortality. A yearning for immortality runs throughout cyborg discourses. In cyberpunk fiction, taking the postmodern principle of uncertainty to its radical extreme, not even death is a certainty. Cyberpunk fiction writers William Gibson and Rudy Rucker[36] have made immortality a central theme in their books, raising questions about whether nonphysical existence constitutes life and, especially in Gibson's novels, examining how capitalism would allow only the extremely wealthy class to attain immortality by using technology inaccessible to the lower classes. But cyberpunk fiction is not without recognition of the paradoxes and dangers of immortality. In both Gibson's and

36 Rudy Rucker, *Software* (New York: Avon Books, 1982); *Hardware* (New York: Avon Books, 1988).

Rucker's work, characters who attempt to become immortal are usually surrounded by a tragic aura of loneliness and decay.

Even Topo, in the comic book *Cyberpunk*, rejects the idea of leaving his meat behind and remaining permanently in the Playing Field when he is offered the opportunity.[37] What he rejects is immortality But the comic book reveals that the loss of his human body would be tantamount to death; for the invitation to join those who have permanently abandoned their bodies comes from a death mask, called The Head, that addresses him from atop a pedestal. During their conversation, disembodied skulls swoop by around them, reinforcing the death imagery. When, in the next issue, Topo loses his human body and becomes a cyberghost trapped in the Playing Field, the line between life and death becomes more ambiguous [38] There is much speculation among his friends, who remain outside of the computer matrix, about whether Topo is dead or alive. Topo himself says 'after all, I'm only a data construct myself, now. Nothing equivocal about it. We live. We are forms of life, based on electrical impulses. Instead of carbon or other physical matter. We are the next step '

These examples show that cyborg imagery revolves around the opposition between creation and destruction of life, expressing ambivalence about the future of human existence and also, as with the fascist soldier males, uncertainty about the stability of masculine subjectivity. Fusion with electronic technology thus represents a paradoxical desire to preserve human life by destroying it The concept of abandoning the body with pleasure arises in part from late twentieth-century post-nuclear threats to the body: nuclear annihilation, AIDS, and environmental disasters Devising plans to preserve human consciousness outside of the body indicates a desire to redefine the self in an age when human bodies are vulnerable in unprecedented ways. Contemporary concern with the integrity of the body is only the latest manifestation of postwar anxiety over the body's fragility

Neither alive nor dead, the cyborg in popular culture is constituted by paradoxes. its contradictions are its essence, and its vision of a discordant future is in fact a projection of our own conflictual present What is really being debated in the discourses surrounding a cyborg future are contemporary disputes concerning gender and sexuality, with the future providing a clean slate, or a blank screen, onto which we can project our fascination and fears. While some texts cling to traditional gender roles and circumscribed sexual relations, others experiment with alternatives It is perhaps ironic, though, that a debate over gender and sexuality finds expression in the context of the cyborg, an entity that makes sexuality, gender, even humankind itself, anachronistic. Foucault's statement that 'man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' prefigures the consequences of a cyborg future [39]

37 Scott Rockwell, *Cyberpunk* book two, vol 1, no 1 (Wheeling West Virginia Innovative Corporation, 1990)

38 Scott Rockwell *Cyberpunk*, book two, vol 1 no 2 (Wheeling West Virginia Innovative Corporation 1990)

39 Michel Foucault *The Order of Things An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York Vintage Books 1973) p 387

But, as Foucault also argues, it is precisely during a time of discursive crisis, when categories previously taken for granted become subject to dispute, that new concepts emerge. Late twentieth-century debates over sexuality and gender roles have thus contributed to producing the concept of the cyborg. And, depending on one's stake in the outcome, one can look to the cyborg to provide either liberation or annihilation

This essay is part of a longer book-length project

The eye of the storm

KEVIN ROBINS and LES LEVIDOW

Even before 'Operation Desert Storm' had ended, it had become a cliche to dub it, referring to an addictive computer game, the Nintendo war. The US military remote-controlled its attack through an array of surveillance, simulation and strike technologies At the same time, tele-spectators could identify with the technology 'taking out' alien targets apparently without human consequences Moreover, by evoking the computer-game comparison, in which the participant–viewer feels constantly under threat, the remote technology served to portray as heroic 'combat' what was mainly a series of massacres.

If Desert Storm was a screen-gazing war, its reality was at the same time screened out That screening, in the dual sense, provided crucial support for the 'just war', epitomizing the West's claims for its superior morality Thus the war against Iraq also involved a battle for 'hearts and eyes', as well as minds, here in the West That perceptual conflict highlights the relation of vision to feeling and understanding, and to a problematic sense of humanity in western culture

During the Gulf War, the trend in military technologies became apparent. New global networks of sensors turned a whole country, conceptually speaking, into targeting information The five months preceding the attack on Iraq in January 1991 involved laborious 'software work' to digitally map and plot strategic installations there The networks were then used to keep track of targets in real time, to program and guide 'precision' long-range weapons, and then to undertake 'battle damage assessment'. The whole network formed a closed system, a kind of cybernetic input and feedback loop.

The role of vision and image technologies was crucial to the functioning of this system Military strategy has always been about seeing and not being seen, about combining vision with stealth. It is the increasing automation and precision of this principle, however, that makes the new generation of weapons 'smart' and 'brilliant'. From the earliest days we were told of the American spy satellites orbiting over the Middle East With their multiple ways of seeing – photography, radar imaging, infrared imaging – America's 'secret eyes in space' looked through night and fog, peering into Iraq's entire civilian and industrial infrastructure, dubbed 'Saddam Hussein's war machine' Iraq was being surveyed from space and then pinned down for 'precise military surgery'.

In this war, we learned that the weapons of destruction had piercing electronic eyes, too Aircraft like the American F-15E and the British Tornado were equipped with imaging systems that illuminate objects with infrared beams, allowing low altitude flying and location of targets in the desert night In the nose of the Apache helicopter was a forward-looking infrared navigation and targeting system that projected information onto screens in the visors of the crews' helmets After the strikes had been launched, photo-reconnaissance aircraft would then sweep across the skies of Kuwait and Iraq, documenting the 'degradation' of hostile forces and feeding this photo-information back into the central intelligence computers

The ultimate achievement was the

Tomahawk cruise missile, which has been described as a 'brilliant' weapon, fired and then forgotten. For most of its journey the Tomahawk navigates through a radar altimeter which compares the topography of its flight path against detailed terrain maps stored in its memory. As it reaches its 'terminal end point', a new guidance system takes over with a small digital camera comparing the view from the nose against a library of stored images. These images have been prepared from earlier satellite reconnaissance photographs of selected targets. It was through this vision guidance system that the missile was able to achieve the 'precision' penetration of a 'surgical strike' – 'down the air vent' or 'through the front door'. Of the first fifty-two Tomahawks fired, we are told, fifty-one hit their target.

These high-tech weapon systems dominated our perception of the war, creating a sense of technological euphoria. We saw them hit enemy targets, as if we were riding or guiding the weapons, though the video game images concealed what it meant to 'cleanse' or 'neutralize'. We thought even less about what these images were doing to us, the watchers. We came to see the war through the passionless eyes of these 'smart' weapons, through their surgical scan and their penetrative look. Through this missile-eyed perspective, we too came to look down on Iraq as a 'target-rich environment'. What this created, as Robert J. Lifton has suggested, was a kind of psychic numbing: 'the splitting or inner division of parts of the individual mind, in this case a separation of knowledge from feeling. We know that our weapons are murderous, but we cannot afford to feel the pain of death at the other side of them' (*The Guardian*, 14 February 1991). In this war, combat was mediated and simulated through the screen. Soldiers and spectators alike were involved in a new kind of remotely-exhilarating tele-action; both were tele-present and tele-engaged in the theatre of war. And, as they were drawn into this image-space, home spectators, and even many soldiers, became detached from the bloody reality. When they could no longer do so, or when they could no longer easily experience their activity as military combat, soldiers devised a series of animal metaphors, such as 'turkey shoot', to detach themselves emotionally and morally from human death.

Launching his precision weapons, the soldier achieves a moral dissociation. His victims become psychologically invisible. Killing is done 'at a distance', through technological mediation, without the shock of direct confrontation and violence; it breaks the causal link between the firing button and the deaths that ensue. This kind of psychological insulation is generally enhanced if the victims are 'out of sight'. What is clear, however, is that moral invisibility is not necessarily undermined by optical visibility – or at least by certain kinds of mediated and remote visibility.

In the Gulf War, the vision of the long camera shot extended the moral distanciation of previous wars. The silent movie filmed from the bomb bay or from the nose of the missile had a similar numbing remoteness. In this war, however, the rationalization of vision was pushed further. Here we had an apparently greater visual proximity between the killer and the victim. Indeed, the missile-nose view of the target simulated a superreal closeness which no human being could ever attain. It was the ultimate voyeurism: to see the target hit from the vantage point of the weapon. An inhuman perspective. Yet this remote-intimate kind of watching could sustain the moral detachment of earlier military technologies. Seeing was split off from feeling, the visible was separated from the sense of pain and death. Through the long lens the enemy remained a faceless alien. Her and his bodily existence was de-realised.

Thanks to the cameras in their guided weapons, the western military forces were

able to replay their destruction of enemy targets to analyse the pinpointedness of their accuracy Like football coaches, they could meticulously review the tapes to assess the success of the game plan And through these replays they could reactivate the frisson of excitement: 'I am going to show you the luckiest man in Iraq on this particular day', General Schwarzkopf boasted to the world's media as he showed them footage of an Iraqi vehicle passing through the crosshairs of a bomb sight shortly before the bomb 'took out' the bridge it had been travelling across. It was perhaps the costliest tracking shot ever But to watch it, to linger over its slow-motion precision, was to identify with the technological supremacy underpinning the West's claims to moral superiority

Meanwhile, back at home, other voyeurs could tele-consume the same images and exult in the same fantasies. At home, we could even listen to American generals giving voice-over commentary on the video bombing. The high-tech strikes were played over and over on the western networks, watched and rewatched. Home viewers were encouraged to identify with the technical expertise of those who were scripting the wargame. Public acceptance of the war depended on the coexistence of remote engagement and moral detachment As Tony Hall, Director of BBC News and Current Affairs, came to acknowledge, too many 'Boy's Own reports' on the high-tech equipment conspired to create the image of a 'sort of amusement-alley warfare'. Through the evidential force of the images, we could know about the war, but it was a kind of de-realised war we were knowing. It was at once a way of seeing and a way of not seeing Drawn into the image, it was as if we were exempted from our responsibility as participants in a reality

Even if we were delinked from it, the reality was always there, however And there was always the danger that the images might eventually give access to that reality. Certain military videos were for private screening only General Schwarzkopf did not want the world to see what the camera recorded on the driver's face as it was propelled into the cab of another Iraqi vehicle. And what of the night vision shots from Apache helicopter raids? 'Even hardened soldiers' John Balzar reported, 'hold their breath as Iraqi soldiers, as big as football players on the television screen, run with nowhere to hide. These are not bridges or aeroplane hangars These are men.' The Iraqi soldiers looked 'like ghostly sheep flushed from a pen – bewildered and terrified, jarred from sleep and fleeing their bunkers under a hellish fire One by one, they were cut down by attackers they could not see' (*The Guardian*, 25 February 1991) When smart turned to hellish, the images had to be censored Although some troops reportedly enjoyed watching these video films over and over again, the audience back home had to be protected from images which might have presented 'combat' as massacre Only long after the war did we see some of these images on television: they were all too eloquent records of the West's technological supremacy (or of the deadly expertise it calls supremacy, at least)

But not all 'disturbing' images could be screened out As the war developed, the repressed reality did break through. On 13 February, at Baghdad's Al-Amiriya air-raid shelter, we saw the first real pictures of burning, mutilation and death. For the first time, we saw the faces and even heard the voices of the victims. Limited by their own technocratic vision, US officials were hard pressed to explain away the hundreds of shrouded corpses. They could respond only by insisting that surveillance pictures showed it to be a military installation, and that cameras on board American jets recorded a precise hit on a 'positively-identified military target'. Expensive cameras don't lie: there was no way it could be a civilian refuge 'I have no idea why there were civilians in the bunker at four in the morning – it belies

logic', commented General Neal

And, for the first time since the start of the war, British television had to acknowledge its own acts of censorship. Television news felt that it was necessary to 'edit' these images because of their 'disturbing nature'. Closeup images of real death would disturb our unreal sense of video-game war without bloodshed, and would show how deadly precise precision weapons can be Questions of 'taste' and 'sensitivity' made it desirable to shroud the killings in the 'fog of war' where no one sees clearly

And again, 'apocalyptically', on the Basra road, reality threatened to spill over the images After another massacre hit thousands of soldiers and civilians scrambling to escape Kuwait City, the carnage made a mockery of surgical strikes and Nintendo wars. 'Far from the smart bomb videos and "target-rich environment" jargon,' wrote one correspondent, 'the grim reality of war is a horror to behold.' He describes how an American intelligence officer 'lifted his camera to snap a photo of a cluster of blackened bodies Then he let the camera drop' (*The Guardian*, 11 March 1991). In the midst of slaughter, the blackened skulls stared back from their burnt-out sockets Suddenly journalists were confronted by that thing they call the 'reality of war'.

From this final 'turkey shoot', we have an image, a charred mask of ash, that was once the face of an Iraqi soldier, a target sitting on top of a tank. Already it has been hailed as a classic war photograph: it has come to symbolize the 'reality of war' Offered to several British Sunday papers, it was rejected by *The Sunday Times* as unsuitable for family viewing on a Sunday morning, but was published by *The Observer* (3 October 1991), captioned 'the killing fields of Kuwait', with an implied analogy with the Khmer Rouge holocaust against the Cambodian people. The accompanying report by journalist Colin Smith described the panicked retreat, 'more gypsy than military', as having undergone 'one of the most terrible harassments of a retreating army from the air in the history of warfare.' 'I wouldn't even call this a mopping-up operation,' said a US officer

In the following week's *Observer*, Harold Evans wrote to explain why, despite having supported the war, he backed the newspaper's decision to publish. By dissolving the photo into a timeless horror of war, however, his defence served to detach the image from the journalist's report, which had questioned whether the attack could be called 'combat'. The picture was, says Evans, 'a necessary shock': 'It was a solitary individual in the transfixation of a hideous death. Before this, it had been possible to enjoy the lethal felicity of designer bombs as some kind of video game' (*The Observer*, 10 March 1991). Here we were confronted with the consequences of our belief in this 'just war'. And here too, through this image, we could experience 'an elemental human sympathy'. 'The disputed photograph', Evans writes, 'did something to redress the elusive euphoria of a high-tech war ' But did it? Could it? The reality, of course, was that this was, precisely, the outcome of the video-game war fantasy. What could the 'still silence' of this corpse tell us about post-heroic warfare? Of course, those who have seen this image 'will never forget it' But what will they remember of its meaning? The contest over interpretation will determine whether we experience such disturbing images as symbolizing the unavoidable (and perhaps exceptional) horror of a 'just war', or, alternatively a series of massacres presented as honourable combat.

Thus Desert Storm has highlighted what is potentially dehumanizing about the role of images in our society, in our culture of viewing. Through our vision technologies we were able to disavow the reality; that there were real people, other living beings, on the other side of the electronic images. We could see, but we were deaf to what we saw 'Four or five times a day', John Berger writes, 'the

public received a TV lesson about how to become deaf to the voice of their memory, of their conscience or of their imagination.' There was a connection, he suggests, between this deafness and the high-tech arms that brought such a swift victory: 'Both operated as inhuman agents *at a distance*' (*The Guardian*, 2 March 1991) Our deafness betrayed our inhumanity We inflicted high-tech Armageddon upon a people we didn't even know We never heard their voices or listened to their point of view. In his war poem, 'A Cold Coming', Tony Harrison focuses on what the charred man might have to *say*. It becomes necessary 'to find words for this frightening mask'·

> So press RECORD! I want to reach
> the warring nations with my speech.
>
> Don't look away! I know it's hard
> to keep regarding one so charred.

Through our new vision and image technologies, we were able, almost at will, to zoom in on the action. We could come close, but we were looking in the wrong way, and in the wrong direction. The images engaged our identification with the lethal eye of the storm, while assisting our disengagement from its political purposes and human consequences.

review article:

James Donald (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds* (Communications and Culture Series). London: Macmillan, 1990, 189pp.

E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (AFI Film Readers Series). New York and London: Routledge, 1990, 249pp.

SUSANNAH RADSTONE

In 1975, Claire Johnston, to whose memory *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* is dedicated, warned that 'there is a very distinct danger that psychoanalysis can be used to blur any serious engagement with political-cultural issues'.[1] In addition to the publication of the two volumes here under review, 1990 saw the Freud Museum's 'Speculations[1]' conference forced to change venue to accommodate all its participants, the continued critical success of Free Association Books, publishers of an eclectic and wide-ranging list of new and 'recovered' works of psychoanalytic theory, the fourth annual 'Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere' conference at the Polytechnic of East London, and the founding of the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Kent [2] That this comprises anything but an exhaustive account of the expansion of psychoanalytic theory within and at the margins of the academy during the past year testifies to the continuing – or even possibly the renewed – vitality of the field But Johnston's warning raises a number of questions about both history and memory. And considered from the vantage point of 1991, it certainly appears prefigurative

Since 1975, it has been repeatedly argued – notably by feminist theorists – that the tendency of Lacanian or post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to diminish rather than enhance our capacity to theorize the specificity of the political-cultural might be countered

1 Claire Johnston Femininity and the masquerade *Anne of the Indies*' was originally published in Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen (eds), *Jacques Tourneur* (Edinburgh Edinburgh Film Festival 1975) pp 16–35

2 'Speculations[1] Appraising Psychoanalysis Philosophy and Cultural Studies was held at the French Institute in London on 26, 27 and 28 October 1990 This was an international conference organized by the Freud Museum which aimed to bring together practitioners and academics Speakers included Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Cornelius Castoriades James Hillman Sarah Kofman Nicholas Rand Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Maria Torok Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere is an annual conference organized jointly by the journal *Free Associations* together with staff from the Sociology department at the Polytechnic of East London For a report on developments at the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Kent see Martin Stanton 'Psychoanalaysis in British universities the Kent case *Free Associations*, no 20 (1990) The Centre received over six hundred applications for places to undertake postgraduate research in 1990 Future plans include the incorporation of work on film into the Centre s research programme

by an appeal to history.[3] Yet if in the 1990s we are to traverse what E. Ann Kaplan refers to as 'the often discussed impasse regarding psychoanalysis and history' (*Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, p. 16), then what is required is a *theorized* version of history: a version of history that has fully acknowledged that incommensurability between the psychic and the social upon which Freud's theory of the unconscious is founded. By no means all of the essays collected in these two volumes endeavour to traverse this impasse – but that some do provides grounds for at least guarded optimism.

However, if *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* and *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds* are both books very much of their time, they bear the marks of their time quite differently. While *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* is clearly illustrative of an engagement with post-Lacanian theory that was so much the mark, during the late eighties, of a certain tendency within British Left intellectual life, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*'s somewhat cavalier attitude to the history of its own contents arguably marks it out as 'postmodern'.

Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds collects together a series of papers originally presented at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London between January and March 1987. As James Donald freely acknowledges in his editorial introduction, the psychoanalysis referred to here by each author is 'psychoanalysis after the feminist rereading of Lacan's rereading of Freud'. (p. 2) Thus absent from this collection is any representation of work on psychoanalysis and cultural theory influenced by either the Kleinians or the Independent Tradition.[4] This absence is certainly overdetermined: it must stem in part from the fact that in 1987 only one 'Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere' conference had taken place – this is now an annual event which has become an important forum for the promulgation of psychoanalytic cultural theory shaped by both object-relations and Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis. But another determinant must be the continued dominance of Lacanian-influenced work within certain circles, where to speak approvingly of, say, Klein or the Independent Tradition is still to be regarded as somewhat *outré*.

Donald's introduction, 'On the threshold: psychoanalysis and cultural studies', opens somewhat disarmingly by acknowledging the apprehension with which the editor had approached this project: 'my first reaction was to reach for my address book and suggest better qualified alternatives'. Donald continues with a useful historical account of engagements with questions of subjectivity produced within cultural theory prior to its incorporation of psychoanalytic theory. Donald argues that the impact of this incorporation – which took place in the early 1970s – was to render redundant models of the relation between the 'outside' and the 'inside' – such as those of E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams – which assumed that 'a

3 See, for instance, E. Ann Kaplan, 'Feminist film criticism: current issues and problems', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* vol. 19, no. 1 (1986), pp. 7–20. Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982). Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984), esp. p. 186.

4 For an accessible introduction to the work of Melanie Klein, see Juliet Mitchell (ed.), *The Selected Melanie Klein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). For an introduction to The Independent Tradition see Gregorio Kohon (ed.), *The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition* (London: Free Association Books, 1987). For an extremely succinct and clear exposition of the work of the Independent Tradition together with an excellent introduction to object-relations work more generally, see Michael Rustin's review essay, 'Shifting paradigms in psychoanalysis since the 1940s', *History Workshop Journal* no. 26 (1988).

shared social and historical experience produces a common sensibility which is the stuff of individual consciousness'. (p. 5) To my mind, however, Donald's characterization of the work of these theorists does them some disservice He argues that the impact of psychoanalysis was to explode the 'very idea of a complete or achieved identity to which Thompson and Williams ascribe such ethical and political importance'. (p. 5) Yet what marks Williams's work especially, particularly his autobiographical writings – and what makes it so inspiring – is both an acknowledgement of, and a striving towards, learning to live productively with a historically specific 'failure' of identity. Williams's work preceded, though, the incorporation of psychoanalytic theory into cultural studies – which prompts Donald to characterize it as concerned merely with 'passing blip(s) in a process of socialization' (p 4), rather than with the more profound failures of identity which, Donald insists, only psychoanalytically informed cultural theory can address.

Thus *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* reserves the term 'failure' to refer to that constant failure of identity – or the failure, as Donald later puts it, of ideology to get the full measure of subjectivity – revealed by the stress *psychoanalysis* lays on the (inevitable) lack of fit between the social and the psychical. It was this revelation of an excess beyond processes of interpellation which, according to Donald, laid waste cultural theory's previous understandings of the 'fit' between ideology and subjectivity. But in rejecting rather than reworking Williams's emphasis on the historically (and regionally) specific production of experience, *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* risks sacrificing history for the unconscious. Each of the essays in this collection constitutes an attempt, explains Donald, to trace the marks of an excess beyond processes of interpellation in culture – to document that very 'failure of identity' upon which the social arguably lays its foundations.

Donald does acknowledge, though, that the transaction between psychoanalysis and cultural theory is not all one way, since cultural theory's strivings to address the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of social antagonisms seems to fit only uneasily with the 'grand narratives' of Oedipus and castration in psychoanalysis That the essays in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* address these questions only tangentially, if at all, arguably evidences the absence within cultural theory of a fully theorized version of history, an absence determined in part, perhaps, by an outright rejection (repression?) of, rather than an attempt to revise or remember, cultural theory's earlier versions of history

The essays in this collection which might be of greatest interest to *Screen* readers are those by Victor Burgin, Elizabeth Cowie and Laura Mulvey Of these three, it is Burgin's 'Geometry and abjection' which perhaps comes closest to a documentation of identity's failure in the context of an appeal to history. This essay is

one of many in both the books under review here to attempt some revision of 'apparatus theory' as instituted by Metz and Baudry. Burgin draws attention to a *theoretical* failure which is at the same time a failure to engage with history; for his thesis is that there is a fundamental incompatibility between historical representations of space and psychoanalytically-inspired theories of representation. While the conjoining of the 'cone of vision' model with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage usefully clarified that deconstruction of the subject/object dichotomy which lay at the heart of 1970s *Screen* film theory, argues Burgin, it also led to the confusion of the 'lost' object with the real object, since it worked with an 'outdated' representation of space. For Burgin, what apparatus theory signally fails to theorize is that representation of space as self-enclosure – space as a folding back upon itself – which arguably characterizes postmodern culture To counter this tendency, Burgin proposes a revision of apparatus theory through incorporation of the later Lacan, whose three-dimensional models revealed the unconscious as a structure with neither an outside nor an inside; together with an incorporation of the Kristevan concept of the 'abject' as that which precedes the subject/object dichotomy His essay concludes by countering the apocalyptic tone of much writing on the postmodern with the assertion that there is nothing new in insecurity since it is subjectivity's very condition What does change, however, is space· 'perhaps we are again at a moment in history when we need to define the changing geometries of our changing places' (p. 23) While Burgin's revisions of apparatus theory are of some lasting value, what his essay leaves untheorized, or at best implicit, is the question of 'changing space' – the question, that is, of the model of *history* required within which these changes might be theorized

If Burgin's mobilization of Kristevan psychoanalytic theory touches, amongst other things, upon an ambivalence towards 'the maternal', Mulvey's 'The Oedipus myth. beyond the riddles of the sphinx' in part constitutes a rejoinder. She concludes her narratological study of the Oedipus myths by suggesting that what Freudian and Lacanian readings of the myths occult is their symptomatic registering of the 'unspeakable' threat of the primal preoedipal father. Mulvey contrasts this reading of the Oedipus myths with Kristeva's assertion that the phenomena of horror and disgust symptomatically suggest a culture returning under the aegis of a preoedipal mother: 'perhaps it is the "unspeakable" ghost of Laius that haunts relations between men . . .' (p 48) Mulvey's essay, which compares the eruption of the primal father in the Oedipus myths to the eruption of Frank in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), attempts to restore the study of narrative to a central position within psychoanalytically informed cultural studies, arguing that 'structuralist' readings of Lacan obscure the centrality of narrative within his own theories of unconscious life While

Mulvey's essay, and most notably her comparison of the Oedipus myths with *Blue Velvet*, does anything but address the specificity of a political–cultural moment, her insistence on the centrality of narrative analysis raises important questions about temporality. Narrative, though 'outside history' (p. 44), argues Mulvey, can have a bearing upon history through the continual remembering of both individual histories and collective myths.

In her essay '*Underworld USA*: psychoanalysis and film theory in the 1980s', Elizabeth Cowie contributes to the critique of 'apparatus theory' by asserting, counter to Metz and Baudry, that 'narrative structures, scenarios of fantasy and positions of identification may all be involved in producing an *unfixing* of the subject' (p. 110) Cowie here takes issue with the critical opposition repeated by much 1970s *Screen* film criticism between 'good' and 'bad' cinema, where 'bad' is aligned with a Metzian notion of the Imaginary. Cowie's revision of this critical tendency depends upon her assertion that the Metzian apparatus was founded upon a misunderstanding of what constitutes 'the Imaginary' of the Lacanian mirror stage 'The miscognition of the mirror stage is not an identification with a false unified subjectivity', she insists, 'the miscognition is, in fact, that the image is unified.' (p. 107) This miscognition bears the traces of what Cowie seeks to identify by the use of the term imaginary – that is, a subjective relation to desire, rather than a material phenomenon of perception. These important and valuable revisions to psychoanalytic film theory lead to the proposal of another critical practice, which Cowie seeks to illustrate by means of an analysis of the film *Underworld USA* (Samuel Fuller, 1960). Pivotal to her analysis is a revision of Brechtian aesthetics to show how narrative structures, fantasy scenarios and identification can all be deployed to foreground rather than elide the lack in the Other. What I find puzzling about this essay, however, is its ending, where Cowie moves towards replacing the binary opposition of 'good' and 'bad' cinema with her own aesthetics of film: 'we are confronted, at the end of the film', she argues, 'with the lack in the Other, and *Underworld USA* offers no simple fantasy with which to "*gentrify*" this lack' (p. 134, emphasis mine). Could it be that the insertion of a metaphor of class at a rather telling point in the essay symptomatically identifies a difficulty this new aesthetics might have in distinguishing between that which foregrounds the lack in the Other, and that which does not?

Each of the remaining essays in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* documents further those 'failures' of identity discussed in the editor's introduction Mary Kelly's image series 'Interim part 1. corpus' and its accompanying commentary constitute an interrogation of what she calls psychoanalytic orthodoxies, especially with regard to the question of hysteria and its relation to femininity. Focusing on the representation of the older woman, Kelly poses the

question of whether the woman can reconstitute her narcissistic aim outside the maternal relation. Parveen Adams's 'Per os(cillation)' takes issue with the Freudian thesis that processes of identification determine sexual position and object choice, arguing that the identification that produces sexual difference within the Freudian Oedipus complex is hysterical and therefore oscillates Homi Bhabha's 'Question of survival: nations and psychic states' deploys Derridean and Lacanian theory to view the communality of 'the people' as an enunciation which produces a positionality that is always split and therefore uncanny. Robert Young's 'Psychoanalysis and political literary theories' asks a fundamental question about the appropriateness of psychoanalytic theory as a methodological tool for analysing the social psychoanalysis, insists Young, is predicated upon the fundamental incompatibility between the psychic and the social. Psychoanalytically informed cultural theory needs to consider, therefore, the question of what replaces the social within the psyche/social pair, when the social is being analysed as though it were the psyche Elizabeth Wright's 'The reader in analysis' argues that only Lacanian psychoanalysis can provide a textual theory of the affective side of reading which privileges neither author nor reader Finally, John Forrester's 'Psychoanalysis: telepathy, gossip and/or science' marks the extention of one avenue that may well prove immensely productive in the 1990s: namely, the attempt to deploy a psychoanalytically informed methodology to produce a cultural history of psychoanalysis

While the essays collected in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* evidence a real commitment to the constant rethinking of psychoanalytic theory, two aspects of the book are somewhat disappointing. As with so much of the Lacanian-influenced psychoanalytic work currently undertaken within the academy, the essays collected here are extremely dense and particularly demanding In light of the sheer difficulty of the material, Donald's assertion that it requires no editorial exposition other than the brief contextualization he offers seems to me mistaken Had the volume included an expository introduction and also perhaps abstracts for each paper, I would feel comfortable about recommending it to students: as it stands, I do not. My second disappointment concerns the extent to which the papers collected here attempt to negotiate the impasse between psychoanalysis and history referred to earlier For although Donald gestures towards the need on the part of cultural theory to rethink its key terms – notably, in light of the insights provided by psychoanalytic theory, the concept of hegemony – there is in fact little evidence of such work here. In particular, the question no one seems to be asking (and perhaps one risks appearing naive in posing it) is: how we are to explain, in the face of the many 'failures' of identity catalogued within these pages, the degree of social cohesion that is still arguably to be found? At the

'Speculations!' conference, Gayatri Spivak pointed out that although psychoanalysis arguably facilitates the restoration of individual agency, it would be a mistake to imagine a direct line between individual agency and collective political agency. It is equally mistaken to imagine a direct line between the 'failure' of identity and the 'collapse' of the utility of hegemony as a concept

It is interesting to note that such 'speculations' are most often to be found amongst cultural theorists whose psychoanalytic theory is informed by an object-relations influenced model of unconscious life. A strikingly sophisticated example of such work is Barry Richards's 1984 paper 'Schizoid states and the market' [5] Richards works with concepts introduced by British object-relations theorists W R D. Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip Richards's discussion of contemporary urban culture pays particular attention to the presence of high levels of administrative rationality and commodity consumption. Alongside these, he argues, clinical evidence points to the high occurrence of defences characteristic of borderline schizoid states His analysis suggests that these borderline psychotic defences signal anything but a breakdown of hegemony: on the contrary, the defences deployed within borderline schizoid psychosis fit well with the highly rationalized commodified character of contemporary urban life, leading him to propose a 'reciprocal reinvigoration'[6] between hegemony and defence. Richards's essay deploys the object-relations concept of splitting to account for the unconscious processes which subtend the borderline defences discussed. Splitting may also, perhaps, account for the absence in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* of any object-relations influenced psychoanalytic cultural theory. Perhaps in the 1990s THERIP – a newly-formed network for academic and clinical psychoanalytic research – will initiate integration between these two tendencies

5 Barry Richards 'Schizoid states and the market' in Barry Richards (ed), *Capitalism and Infancy Essays on Psychoanalysis and Politics* (London Free Association Books 1984), pp 122–66

6 Ibid p 159

While the essays in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* were all commissioned for that volume, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* brings together a selection of articles previously published in film journals – and therefore, perhaps, already familiar to many *Screen* readers Paradoxically, although the book's editor E. Ann Kaplan raises the question of history most insistently in her introduction, the history of these articles is occulted here Indeed, the original publication date of Claire Johnston's essay 'Femininity and the masquerade *Anne of the Indies*', which contains the remark cited earlier about psychoanalysis possibly hindering political-cultural analysis, comes to light only in the notes appended to another essay included in the collection. The omission of such crucial historical information sits anything but comfortably with Kaplan's laudable call for the revision of psychoanalytic film theory in light of the need for a fully historicized approach to cinema

Overall, Kaplan's collection strikes me as over-ambitious, and her editorial introduction consequently rather incoherent, if not

inaccurate, in places. Entitled 'From Plato's cave to Freud's dream screen', it offers a comparison of psychoanalytic theory and method within literary and film studies; a categorization of the six aspects of psychoanalytic theory which, Kaplan believes, inform literary and film studies and which, she says, need to be more carefully distinguished from each other; and an appeal for a psychoanalytic theory which can begin to address questions of history. Though the distinctions Kaplan draws – between psychoanalysis used to explain literary relationships, psychoanalysis as structurally an aesthetic discourse, psychoanalysis in a narrative discourse, psychoanalysis as an historical, ideological and cultural discourse, and psychoanalysis as a specific process used by the cultural critic – are useful, she does not really draw upon them in her extremely brief exposition of the articles collected in this volume. Where these distinctions are alluded to, they are not always correctly applied: she refers, for example, to two articles which discuss psychoanalysis as an historical discourse belonging in her category four, whereas this is listed earlier as category five. This is just one of a number of small slips which pepper the introduction, in which Nancy Chodorow, whose work is clearly influenced by object-relations theory, is described as an American Freudian

While Kaplan asserts that the essays collected in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* move away from the dominance within film theory of Lacanian and post-Lacanian work, this is not really borne out by the material itself Despite occasional references to Klein, the overall impression is of a continuing engagement with Lacan and with feminist critiques of Lacan. Indeed, Kaplan's own essay, 'Motherhood and representation. from post-war Freudian figurations to postmodernism', seems to suggest that there are 'real' psychical depths which, Cousteau-like, only Lacan has penetrated, rather than different conceptual representations of the psychical apparatus Discussing Mrs Vale in *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, Warner Bros, 1942), for example, Kaplan argues that 'for a short space during the opening sequence, the film touches on deeper (even Lacanian) levels, showing Mrs Vale as a mother who tries to keep her daughter down with her in the Imaginary . .' (p 131) – implying that only Lacanian theory has colonized the 'deepest' regions of the psychical apparatus

These caveats aside, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* is valuable in its focus on the 'problem' of history. Nevertheless, even this runs the risk of being obscured by the very over-ambition of the collection. Kaplan divides her material into five sections, though several of the articles in the collection might have been included in more than one of them. The first, 'Feminist Film Theory and Its Revisionings', contains Laura Mulvey's 'Afterthoughts on "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" inspired by *Duel In The Sun*' (for which no original date or place of publication is given)[7]; Anne Friedberg on

7 This essay was first published in *Framework* nos 15/16/17 (1981)

the patriarchal nature of all identification; and Mary Ann Doane's 'Remembering women psychical and historical constructions in film theory' Section Two comprises articles by Claire Johnston, Deborah Linderman and Raymond Bellour on the work of the director Jacques Tourneur – though nowhere is it explained why this particular director has been singled out. Section Three, 'Beyond the Impasse? History and Psychoanalysis in Reading Select Films', includes essays by Kaja Silverman (discussed below) together with Kaplan herself on post-World War II representations of motherhood; and Section Four, 'Avant-garde Film· Theory and Practice', includes an essay by filmmaker Yvonne Rainer discussing the impact of feminist film theory on her own practice The fifth and final section, 'Afterword', consists solely of a newly translated interview between Raymond Bellour and Guy Rosolato. That Kaplan's introductory comments do little to clarify the density of the Bellour–Rosolato dialogue is particularly to be regretted, since this discussion circles around key questions of cinema and memory

A focus upon memory is shared by the two essays in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* – those by Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman – which seem to me to move closest to traversing the impasse between psychoanalysis and history referred to in the editor's introduction. Doane's 'Remembering women· psychical and historical constructions in film theory' – included in the section of *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* concerned with feminist film theory rather than in the one concerned with the 'problem' of history – is premissed on the belief that the gloom characterizing much feminist film criticism arises from the pessimism of apparatus theory and its abstraction of woman. Doane distinguishes between Freud's earlier optical instrument metaphors of the psychical apparatus – metaphors which influenced the apparatus theory of Baudry and Metz, and which clearly have some bearing upon Lacanian thinking – and his later deployment of the metaphor of the 'Mystic Writing Pad' which, unlike the telescope or the camera, could represent the multiple rememberings that are the foundation of unconscious psychical life The problem Doane then has to confront is that the metaphor of the mystic writing pad seems to be particularly inappropriate for the cinema, though it might usefully be deployed in relation to film history Her reading of *The Gold Diggers* (Sally Potter, 1983) suggests that what the metaphor achieves is a reading of the history of woman's cinematic representation that allows women to witness, to remember, their own history

Kaja Silverman's 'Historical trauma and male subjectivity' deploys Fredric Jameson's thesis of history as trauma[8] to analyse a series of US films made between 1944 and 1947. Silverman seems to me to further the form of historical psychoanalytic study called for by Sally Alexander in her 1984 essay 'Women, class, and sexual difference',[9] in which it is argued that 'subjectivity is neither universal nor

8 Fredric Jameson *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1981)

9 Sally Alexander 'Women class and sexual differences in the 1830s and 1840s some reflections on the writing of a feminist history *History Workshop Journal*, no 17 (1984) pp 125–49

ahistorical. First structured through relations of absence and loss, pleasure and unpleasure, difference and division, these are simultaneous with the social naming and placing . . . which are always historically specific.'[10] Silverman, while stressing the significance of Lacan's acknowledgement (*contra* Freud) that *male* subjectivity is founded upon lack, goes on to argue that too often attention has been focused upon the universal experience of symbolic castration 'rather than upon the ways in which it is (variably) articulated. . . Far from belonging to a kind of sacred time,' she continues, 'the phallus . is never more than a distillate of the privileged semes and values of a given symbolic order ' (pp. 112–3) Silverman moves on to propose that a truly *historicized* psychoanalytic film criticism must trace the relations between three conceptual categories the first, the social formation, is defined as 'the *non-unified totality* of discursive practices within and through which the subjects who make up a given socius conduct their material existences' (p 115); the second, the dominant fiction, is defined as a libidinal apparatus upon which social formations depend for their sense of identity and unity (ibid); and the third, history, is identified, following Jameson, with trauma 'as a force capable of tearing a hole in the dominant fiction' (p. 118) While history is always absent and unrepresentable within this formulation, the 'binding' operation through which memory brings trauma within linguistic control can be traced at the level of irregularities within textual practice.

10 Ibid., p 134

In the essays in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* and in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory* that come closest to moving beyond the impasse presented by the problem history poses for psychoanalytic theory, it is memory, therefore, that emerges as the privileged term. It is to be hoped that in the 1990s this avenue of exploration will continue to prove fruitful

review:

***Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory*, nos 20–21, 1989, 378pp. Special issue, 'The Spectatrix', eds Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane**

SANDRA KEMP

This special issue of *Camera Obscura* is a survey of research into the female spectator in film and television studies. The sixty or so authors whose articles are collected here examine the cinematic mechanics of the organization of vision, desire and sexual difference; the crucial relationship between visibility and sexuality; and the pivotal narrative function of the figure of the woman.

Spectator, 'one who sees or beholds a given thing without taking an active part', has the same etymology as spectacle: 'something to look at . presented to view as extraordinary'. The word spectacles also means 'a pair of lenses . . . worn in front of the eyes to improve the sight or correct errors of refraction'. Patricia Mellencamp's description of the world of vision is an apt image of female spectatorship:

> My interest in spectacles . . began with glasses, which, cross-eyed child that I was, I wore since the age of one For me, the world of vision was always a perilous, never natural, never real or fixed space or place but always a set of refracted adjustments to each three month change of prescription. I always saw myself seeing; with each new pair of glasses, I learned to see over again. I wore my glasses when my grandmother read bedtime fairy tales to me in order to hear her properly, suggesting the fallacy of separating spectator from auditor, the deep bias of film theory, dependent on the dominance of vision linked to power and knowledge where 'to see' means 'to understand' (p 237)

Questions of vision, power and knowledge in the construction of visual discourses are crucial to the project of 'The Spectatrix'. In their introduction, 'Contexts and directions', editors Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane explain that they set out to achieve several things:

> (a) to provide a comprehensive statement about the diverse positions held and research undertaken to date, and to project avenues of future studies; (b) to provide a history as well as an intellectual resource guide; (c) to show the international dimensions of research on the female spectator. (p. 17)

To do this they commissioned fifty-nine individual responses to a 'survey letter', and four 'national' overview articles on research in Australia, Canada, Britain and Italy, which are concerned largely with regional differences in the notion of spectatorship For the former, they asked contributors to respond to questions concerning first, the history of their own critical engagement with the issue of female spectatorship, second, the definition and usefulness of the term 'female spectator'; third, whether that term has outlived its usefulness; and fourth, what contributors thought was the potential usefulness of finding alternative interpretations by 'reading against the grain'

What emerges both from the editors' introduction and from the articles that follow is how Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' has created a whole discourse of sexual difference and spectatorship for film. Mulvey constructed terms that would be discussed in feminist film theory for years to come:

> 'It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. . . . Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.' (p 7)

'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' offers a powerful, if controversial, theoretical matrix (informed by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis), and a strong feminist investment in questions of representation. The structure of psychoanalytic concepts – fetishism, voyeurism, castration – and their articulation within the aesthetic categories of narrative and spectacle have provoked new ways of thinking about film 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' is an account of how Freudian psychoanalysis, feminism and politics can be powerfully linked.

A semiotic/psychoanalytic methodology, with its emphasis on subjectivity and on processes of looking and image formation, would seem inevitably to have raised questions of sexual difference. It did not, certainly at first; if only because the concern with spectatorship in the study of film had emerged initially from structural linguistics, in particular from the early work of Christian Metz, whose linguistic/

semiotic practice charted the ways in which meaning is produced specifically in cinema, as opposed to, say, literature. But the desire to account for multiple differences (of race, class and age, as well as of sexuality) in relation to spectatorship, together with the need to incorporate within theory some notion of 'experience', also found increasing support in another intellectual discipline that has informed film studies. cultural studies Gramsci's concept of hegemony, along with other Marxist notions, was exploited at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Cultural Studies under Stuart Hall, authorizing research on subcultures and the notion of subcultural resistance This ethnographic approach made use of such techniques as participant observation and audience interviews.

The semiotic/psychoanalytic and ethnographic approaches part company, however, over the significance of the unconscious, and research into female spectatorship has become increasingly divided, producing a number of conflicting epistemological frameworks In her own article, Mary Ann Doane suggests that in the late 1980s the concept of female spectatorship has become reified and overly familiar. In their editorial, however, Doane and Bergstrom explain that the unfamiliar and relatively unused term 'Spectatrix' was chosen as the title of this issue of *Camera Obscura* 'not to suggest sado-masochistic tendencies in the concept . . . but instead to indicate the density and complexity of the matrix (or matrices) from which these issues emerge'. (p 13) Again, the flipside of the coin is reflected in what Annette Kuhn calls the suspiciously 'hybrid' nature of the concept; and in Meaghan Morris's lack of sympathy with

> many of the currents of thought that have met in the name of 'the female spectator'· psychoanalytic theory, 'femininity' rhetoric, difference-babble, a uniquely academic thematics of 'pleasure' and, recently, a register of cultural studies reviving a kitsch approach to 'facts' part of the problem with 'the female spectator' as *rubric* is precisely its capacity to attract and reconcile otherwise incompatible discourses (and political interests) in the unargued assertion of a common project. (p 241)

The editors, however, admit to a concern about the schematic character of their project ('a certain reductiveness'), and to an awareness that the history they present might appear too neat. But they are equally, and rightly, interested in the firm description of certain epistemological concerns, in 'the tensions, the intellectual alliances and the conflicts which characterize contemporary feminist film and television theory insofar as it circulates around issues of *reading, reception, spectatorship*' (p 13)

So, for example, many of the articles argue the need to broaden enquiry beyond the exclusive parameters of sexual difference. As Jacqueline Bobo points out

> when the female spectator is usually spoken of and spoken for, the female in question is white and middle-class . . . Much more work can be done on people of color, women within a broad range of economic and social strata and others commonly perceived to be on the margins. (p. 102)

Marsha Kinder, too, believes it is 'essential to explore spectator positioning, not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of racial, ethnic, generational and class differences' (p 204) As Mary Ann Doane notes, what is really at issue here are questions of visibility and invisibility, power and sexuality.

Different inflections of the question of female spectatorship are evident also in the international dimension. The overview articles (especially Giuliana Bruno's on Italy and Barbara Creed's on Australia) reveal the crucial significance of the different national processes of media production, distribution and exhibition As Bruno points out

> Writing feminist criticism on female spectatorship in Italy and in the USA is not the same thing.
>
> Questions such as female spectatorship arise, are formed, developed and defined within a specific cultural framework, at particular historical junctures Although not nationally bound, the terms of discourse are culturally defined and not easily transferable from one culture to another. Issues are formulated differently, carry a different weight of meaning, have different origins, modes of existence and circulation. Writing in and between two quite different cultural scenes, I grapple constantly with the question of the placement of discourse and of subject positioning (p 103)

Another key concern of many of the essays is the effect of the institutionalization of feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey asks whether fascination with cinema has given way to fascination with the mechanics of cinema. Lesley Stern is even more emphatic:

> It's not as though I've lost interest in this project [that of the female spectator] but I have developed an abhorrence of the restrictive tropic repertoire that frames the inquiry
>
> There's a kind of generic predictability about the enterprise that has to do with academic disciplines and accreditation (p. 296)

Here the articles reveal strong generational differences In the 1960s and 1970s, 'first generation' feminists operated, for the most part, outside the confines of the university; and a number of the pieces suggest that feminist film theory has now become cut off from its original sense of bold innovation and political purpose.

One of the best examples of the difficulty of negotiating theory and experience emerges in responses to the editors' questions about

the advantages (or disadvantages) of the practice of 'reading against the grain' On the one hand, Gina Marchetti argues that it attributes political agency to a feminist critical endeavour, 'alternative readings and marginalized pleasures within dominant media texts'. (p. 230) On the other hand, Meaghan Morris sees it as the solipsistic, isolated endeavour of the feminist academic who has access to highly sophisticated tools of analysis: 'it can authorize a complacent sense that we *know* what the doxa investing a text are like, and they haven't changed in twenty years'. (p. 245)

Finally, however, it would seem that the most challenging entrant into the arena of debate on female spectatorship has been television All the early work on female spectatorship was done with respect to (Hollywood) film. But as the editors point out,

> Television, conceptualized as a piece of furniture within a domestic space, an event, a process, an environment, a family pastime, a diversion – as well as a 'text', promises to open up the inquiry to new considerations about culture and its operations. (p. 15)

Television indicates the limits of the conceptualization of viewing as spectating. 'I have never thought of the female spectator as synonymous with the woman sitting in front of her screen munching her popcorn', says Mary Ann Doane:

> This statement is not a betrayal of women or evidence of the adoption of a 'post-feminist' mentality. It is clear to me that the category of the 'female spectator' is not eternal, immutable or essential to feminism Its emergence was a function of a discursive strategy at a particular historical moment when reading and readability . . . were centrally important issues in the theorization of film . . The female spectator is a concept, not a person. . . . The question is what the abstraction allows or disallows. (p. 143)

Here we arrive at what Barbara Creed calls the messy realities of the situation. After all, as Mulvey points out, the female spectator is *not* always 'intensely involved in looking'. The limits of spectatorship bring us full circle. The key question (in the words of Annette Kuhn) is 'What do people do with film and television? How do film and television form people? . . . Who are we and what are the *uses* of the knowledge we are seeking?' (p. 216)

The strength of 'The Spectatrix' lies in its refusal to reconcile divergent interests, or to offer answers. The problem of the spectator is simply not available for any comfortable solution. The implicit emphasis of the collection is on feminism as a heterogeneous political activity and not a discrete methodological strategy; and on female spectatorship as a political aspiration born of collective critical practices and creativity.

'The Spectatrix' will be useful not just as an intellectual history of

intersecting methodologies and interests, but also, as Jacqueline Rose reminds us, as an index of how psychic mechanisms can be implicated in institutions and in the political. The collection is incidentally also a record of the development and goals of film theory, and an attempt to find a language of and for cinema between the elusiveness of art and the precision of theory My one minor quibble is that the pieces are hampered by restrictions on space and by the editorial caveat to write 'invitingly'. There is, after all, as Mary Ann Doane points out, 'a limit to how self-reflexive one can be about one's own practice of writing'. (p. 142)

In the end, however, it remains clear that the female spectator is alive and well Her continuing presence is perhaps best summed up by Patricia Mellencamp

> I want to preserve but alter this female spectator, perhaps changing her name and adding new adjectives to describe her better. Unlike Freud's admonitions to a woman 'no longer young', the female spectator is not too old to yield new insights or to change (p 235)

review:

Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video and Feminism* (Theories of Contemporary Culture Series). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, 234pp.

ANGELA McROBBIE

This collection is difficult to review, not just because a number of its chapters have appeared in slightly different form in various US academic journals over the last five years – and thus perhaps inevitably the author is having to restate her intellectual framework each time afresh – but because its style is both passionate and inventive. The essays reflect the author's enthusiasm for a kind of filmmaking and criticism which sidesteps the cautious scholarly mode. Mellencamp is a theorist working on the principle of making use of theory when and where it is pertinent to the questions she is interested in asking as a result, she enjoys taking liberties with theory.

Indiscretions is very much a book of the 1990s it is neither given over to textual analysis nor dismissive of it, it is neither empirical nor historical in the traditional sense, but neither is it contemptuous of fact or of history, and structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and even deconstruction are left by the wayside. *Indiscretions* is a book more influenced by Foucault, by Deleuze and Guattari, and by Baudrillard than by any of the more familiar names in film theory It reads as though written with a burst of energy and with a degree of frustration Mellencamp is writing as a feminist academic whose major interest from the 1960s through to the 1990s has been in the avant garde and the underground cinema tradition. Her commitment to these films has necessarily involved organizing screenings; bringing directors to seminars and conferences in Wisconsin, where she has taught for many years; and helping to

establish the kind of cultural infrastructure needed to keep this kind of show – with no guaranteed audience, no regular venue, no reliable profits, and no promise of further grants and support – on the road.

This kind of organizational work frequently remains undocumented, but it is of the very greatest importance; a prerequisite of criticism, for the simple reason that it makes the work available to the public in the first place. The frustration which occasionally surfaces in Mellencamp's writing comes of being an organizer for many years, with no time to write. She portrays herself as an enthusiast and facilitator to a film culture which was almost wholly dominated by men and given over, it seems, to exploring aspects of the male psyche. Many of the films she mentions – by Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Owen Land and others – were turning points in the history of radical cinema in the US. The underground she describes so entertainingly was, with its own home-made distribution network, its disregard for 'cash flow', and its disdain for consumer culture, in every way an alternative. And yet, she argues, the place occupied by women in this alternative cinema was as the object or transport of sexual liberation. It is only now, many years afterwards, that Mellencamp can bring together a feminist critique with a series of fond memories.

The fond memories, along with many digressions and illustrations (I hesitate to use the word anecdote because of its still derogatory overtones), play an important role in this volume. Frequently it is here that the sharpest analytical insight is found. And this tactic seems to be absolutely central to a methodology adamantly unconstrained by convention, which insists on utilizing at various points a conversational and personal mode and on being able to swing from one level of academic discourse to another without interrupting the flow of argument. While *Indiscretions* could be seen as anarchic in its structure, it could also be seen as employing a series of ruses – in the sense employed by Michel de Certeau – where the author herself appears in disguise one moment an academic spokeswoman on behalf of the avant garde; the next a feminist critic; then a raconteur bringing us tales from the underground, then a cultural archivist putting down in print otherwise undocumented past moments; and, finally, a postmodern writer pursuing a 'rhizomatic' path, where no one mode is privileged and where the voice of the woman writer refuses essentialism, binarism, and transparency.[1]

The object of study in this book is also a difficult one Theory in film and media studies, and also in cultural studies, has developed with its eye cast firmly towards the field of the popular. To some extent, studying popular texts has become almost formulaic It has been easier to produce elegant readings of television genres than to do ethnographic work with audiences or to move back towards the

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1984)

'arts', with all the problems around boundaries of high and pop which this entails In Britain, art remains a bad word in the 'new humanities': it has to be drawn into a broader classification such as women's art work, or women's independent cinema, to sit more easily in the field of cultural criticism. Yet every year thousands of well qualified and talented 'artists', including painters, filmmakers, photographers and designers, emerge from art schools, many of them as informed about postmodern cultural criticism as they are enthusiastic about becoming artists in the traditional sense: this is an issue which film and media studies has been slow to address. *Indiscretions* marks an important departure in its forthright commitment to reawakening a dialogue between the world of the popular and that of the postmodern avant garde.

In every conceivable way, as Mellencamp herself points out in the introduction, the terms of reference for studying the media have undergone a dramatic transformation since the 1960s She charts the move from pop art to postmodernity, from counterculture to consumer culture, from film to video, from cinema to television, and from the underground to the university. Mellencamp's starting point is the avant garde, but hers is already a mixed-media, subcultural avant garde, shorn of connotations of elitism and cold European modernism of the type admired by critics like Susan Sontag It is an avant garde of happenings, events and free screenings attended by ten people and held in the presence of the director. It is an avant garde closely connected with youth subcultural phenomena including music, drugs, clothes, sexual liberation and radical politics.

Mellencamp charts an additional series of transformations in the field of avant-garde cinema, most notably the move from women as the archetypal objects of sexual liberation to the emergence in the 1980s of a female subject whose presence in film as well as behind the camera comes to be a major concern for film theory. The question then is: which came first, the theory of female subjectivity finding expression for the first time in film practice, or the new female practitioners themselves setting the agenda? In answer to this question, Mellencamp points to the centrality of feminist film theory and to the way in which, directly or indirectly, it trickled down into the visual imagination of a number of women filmmakers, including Sally Potter and Yvonne Rainer. Where independent filmmakers had denigrated theory, by the late 1970s and early 1980s theory had itself become the avant garde

Mellencamp also wants the important contribution of the prefeminist US film avant garde put on record: its repudiation of narrative as commodity, its love of unpolished films, its refusal to capitulate to what she calls 'the reconciliatory tactics' to which the European avant garde submitted, and of course its prefiguring of postmodernity in its love of the mixed-media event and constant crossfertilization of form. She remembers how these films 'inverted

the commercial model' by lasting any length of time, by including publicity notes written by the director himself or herself, and by enjoying being outside the rules of intelligibility. But despite the similarities Mellencamp points to between, for example, Barthes's text of bliss and Brakhage's film style, in the long introductory chapter, 'Historically speaking', she concludes by suggesting that the avant garde was accommodated into the mainstream of art culture, and that by the 1990s the notion of cinematic activism had taken on quite different connotations.

In 'Visionary film and sexual difference', Mellencamp draws a parallel in film criticism between the work of P. Adams Sitney, whose influential study *Visionary Film* was published in 1974, and Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. Each points to the radical potential of form, and each shows how a deconstruction of cinematic technique can reveal 'repressed social structures including those of sexual difference'. (p. 18) The avant garde continued, however, to be given over to pursuing a masculine erotic path where women are inscribed as muse or, even better, as objects of the new sexual revolution What remained important was its interest in daily life, its desire to make personal (customized?) films for small sums of money, its do-it-yourself philosophy (which predated by many years punk's DIY fanzine and independent new wave music networks), and what Mellencamp calls its 'vague critique of capitalism'. This emphasis is sustained in the following chapter, 'Video politics', where she insists on the importance of alternative systems of distribution, and where she likens the visionary video artists Ant Farm with Eisenstein in the lengths the former went to bring video to the people in the early 1970s. Once again in this chapter Mellencamp shows the connections between underground video culture in the late 1960s and the kind of postmodern do-it-yourself video culture which exists today 'What fascinates me is the ping-pong dialogue of postmodernism with the counterculture.' (p. 59)

In 'Surveillance and simulation', Mellencamp again points to a set of similarities between the counterculture of the 1960s and contemporary postmodern culture, this time through the centrality of the body. Indeed it is in this chapter that the book's central argument is most clearly articulated The 'body electric' of the underground counterculture provided a host of provocative ideas, to which figures such as both Barthes and Foucault responded. Mellencamp sees Barthes's emphasis on the body in his early work reflecting this influence; while Foucault's important reversal of the countercultural 'let it all hang out' idea in effect gave him the model against which he went on to develop a good deal of his most important work. Far from equating it with absolute freedom and self-expression, Foucault turns the sexual freedom model on its head and shows how the revelation of sex has been a crucial mode of

disciplining the body. From this point onwards, however, Mellencamp's argument changes tack and moves away from the avant garde, the counterculture and postmodernity to focus instead, in a lengthy but productive detour, on 1980s television culture and its closing in on family values, which in turn means bringing the female body – 'a gorgeous tantalising concoction' – into the safe confines of the nuclear family presided over by the middle-class male The parallel here is with classical Hollywood cinema which *is* sex, which writes its narratives around the female body available for male consumption, which is seen through male eyes, and which contains female sexuality in the closing moments of the narrative. These are 'texts of foreplay'· like television narratives, they end on the darkened screen with the woman being either denied and expelled or safely contained in the family. In contrast to this, the avant-garde text 'multiplied our options' It ignored female subjectivity, then; but it should still not be neglected It deserves, Mellencamp implies, a better fate than to be forgotten by film theory, which has made narrative more interesting than it might otherwise be

In the end, therefore, Mellencamp is remembering a history which made an enormous contribution to present-day film culture. What remains of the avant garde today, how sustainable such a practice is, what it might mean in a global culture where the 'great divide' no longer exists, are all questions which urgently need further attention. A critique of the cultural hegemony of the popular is long overdue: a renewed interest in questions of cultural and artistic value is important, not just because intellectuals must be able to do more than 'decode' narratives of popular pleasure, not just because they ought to be able to engage with issues around arts and cultural policy, but also because they owe it to a younger generation of art students and film students to alert them to a tradition which insisted on the pleasures of making and showing low budget (no budget) movies in badly-heated, wooden-seated art houses. There *is* no greater pleasure

review:

Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (Cinema and Society Series). London: Routledge, 1990, 246pp.

Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926–1946* (Cambridge Studies in Film). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 216pp.

ANDREW HIGSON

Is there really room for two further books on the British documentary film movement? In fact, despite any shortcomings, Swann's and Aitken's studies are to be welcomed: both are based on extensive original research using the resources of various relevant archives, and together they throw much new light on the movement. Although there is already a great deal of material available in this area, much of it is written from the point of view of the movement's central protagonists, whether in the form of collections of more-or-less polemical writing from the period, memoirs, interviews, or of more independent studies which still take the heroic stance of the protagonists as their starting point. While there have been various more critical accounts of British documentary in recent years, these have rarely taken the extended form of a book, and few have gone back to primary sources in the way that Swann and Aitken have

What these two books do is provide a comprehensive account of the organization and development of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), General Post Office (GPO), and Crown Film Units (and of some of the other independent units), not so much from the point of view of the filmmakers, but from the standpoint of the administrators and the government departments with which they dealt. Indeed, Paul Swann describes his study as 'an examination of how and why documentary films were made by the British government in the 1920s and 1930s and how and why it went into

the filmmaking business'. (p. vii) It is this fresh revisionist perspective on the role of the State in the efforts of the documentary movement to construct a national cinema in Britain, and the original research on which that perspective is based, which distinguish these two books

In fact, Ian Aitken's book, *Film and Reform*, offers us much more than an account of the documentary units· indeed, it starts to come apart at the seams because of the scope of the project. Aitken tries to combine an intellectual and political biography of Grierson up to the time when he formed the film unit at the EMB with a social history of the documentary movement in the 1930s. While this bifocal perspective is in many respects very helpful, it is in the end profoundly inconsistent, although the problems which this causes might have been sidestepped had a few fairly crucial questions been addressed. The first half of the book goes into great detail on the formative development of Grierson's thinking, and particularly the influence of philosophical idealism, drawing extensively on the Grierson Archive at the University of Stirling. The focus of the second half has much more to do with the documentary movement as a whole in the 1930s. There are chapters on the organization of the EMB and GPO Film Units, followed by detailed accounts of the relationship of the work of the units to the growing traditions of State and corporate public relations policies and practices (including World War I propaganda), and also of the relationship of documentary filmmaking to the various social reform movements of the 1930s. While the concern with Grierson's own intellectual makeup is not entirely lost here, it is certainly submerged in the new concern with an institution What the book needs is a really solid concluding chapter that can hold together all of its various strands Sadly, we don't get this, so that we are either left with a series of only loosely connected essays, or led to believe that Grierson and the British documentary film movement are synonymous.

This latter prospect leaves us with a rather odd version of authorship – but then this is a rather odd book Its greatest virtue lies in its positively encyclopedic effort thoroughly to contextualize and historicize every new turn the narrative takes The scope of the book is enormous, and a vast amount of knowledge is amassed, perhaps too much at times; and as such, Aitken frequently has to rely heavily on secondary sources, often of an unreconstructed nature, in a book which is otherwise characterized by its reliance on primary research Aitken's greatest sin is his unbelievable repetitiveness Phrases, sentences, even whole paragraphs, are repeated not only from one end of the book to the other, or from one chapter to another, but even from one page to the next. Arguments, quotations, and even simple pieces of information which have been carefully established at one point are returned to later as if they had never even been touched on previously. It really is one

of the shoddiest pieces of editing that I have read for a long time. These repetitions certainly should have been ironed out, but it is also the case that some of the historical detail cited as yet further contextual background could have been excluded without losing anything substantial – as could some of the more than a thousand footnotes. There are also some rather bizarre typographical errors scattered throughout what is not a cheap text.

The presence of Swann's book means that the chapters on the organization and development of the major documentary film units do not form the central point of interest in *Film and Reform*. Because this is Swann's central focus he can devote far more space to it than can Aitken, for whom it is only one of several concerns, and for which Aitken is often dependent on familiar sources such as the work of Paul Rotha. But the history of public relations in Britain (which Swann also touches on), and the work on the links between the documentarists and other social reform movements of the period, are very useful. Indeed, Aitken argues that Swann's account (in his PhD thesis, on which the book is based) of why Grierson and his colleagues were unable to make more impact in the 1930s is inadequate because Swann fails to take into consideration the social and political contexts in which they were working. Aitken accuses Swann of relying too heavily on the archives of the Public Record Office and the GPO, so producing a history of the documentary units solely from the point of view of civil servants, which gives a misguided view of Grierson and his colleagues' successes and failures. Thus Swann's account suggests that documentary would have had more influence in the 1930s and in the run-up to World War II if Grierson had not antagonized so many civil servants, and that the real heroes of the piece are sympathetic civil servants.

Aitken establishes a broader perspective by situating these records in the wider context of debates about public relations, social reform and the role of the State. One of his conclusions is that – in the political context of the period, and whatever its limitations – the work of the documentary movement constituted a valid oppositional cultural practice Grierson's view of the State was not consonant with prevailing official policy, and it was this fundamental contradiction, rather than the nitty-gritty of Grierson's dealings with civil servants, which prevented a greater impact on the part of the documentary movement. For the dominant policy of the 1930s forbade the sort of State intervention for which Grierson was arguing and on which the success of the documentary movement depended; preferring instead State encouragement of private corporate enterprise, which was one of the goals of the 1927 Cinematograph Act. Further, despite the advances in public relations during the 1920s and 1930s, there was still no widespread belief that the State needed to win the consent of mass public

opinion on a broad and consistent scale. Finally, documentary was aligned in the eyes of the Establishment with the Left, not least because of its favoured naturalist mode of representation.

Unfortunately, in his attempts to carve out a space for his own argument, Aitken probably does Swann an injustice. It must surely be the case that these broader policies and debates did have a generally debilitating effect on the work of the documentarists, but it is also quite clear on reading Swann that the political strategies adopted by Grierson and his colleagues did have a negative impact on the status of the documentary film units in official eyes. Nor is it the case that Swann fails to attend to the sort of broader issues which Aitken addresses, and he stresses in particular the belief of several key civil servants that commercial filmmaking was of more significance for public relations work than documentary.

The bulk of *Film and Reform* deals not with the documentary units, but with the development of Grierson's film aesthetic and cultural politics, initiated by the perhaps not unreasonable claim that 'Grierson's ideas constitute the most historically important British contribution towards film theory'. (p. 4) Aitken argues that Grierson's particular view of film as an instrument of social persuasion was a product of his interest in philosophical idealism, which was a central aspect of his education at Glasgow University He establishes that in Grierson's thinking, naturalist representation was to be subordinated to symbolic expression, a practice which Aitken demonstrates to be at work in the only film which Grierson directed, *Drifters* (EMB, 1929) The task was to represent not the particular and superficial phenomena of empirical reality – what Grierson called, in a memorable phrase, 'the bank holiday of frenzied events' (quoted p 60), but to use the phenomenal to reach a more abstract, generalized reality, the *essence* of the age, its underlying historical forces, seen from the point of view of a particular, and decidedly masculinist, moral stance Aitken argues that philosophical idealism was a central tenet of Scottish reformism during Grierson's formative years, and that it played a major role in moulding his view of the State as a positive force, the highest level of the social, which was always to be seen as superior to the individual and the personal. Such thinking is, of course, familiar from Grierson's mature writings, and from his decision to work from within the State to generate social reform. But it has to be said that it is one of the failings of Aitken's book that he fails to explore Grierson's best known writings of the 1930s to show how idealist thought is interwoven into Grierson's arguments.

Aitken also shows how Grierson's confrontation with the Chicago school of sociology and the work of Walter Lippman in the United States in the mid 1920s generated in him a scepticism about the capabilities of the 'rational citizen' of democracy While mass communication might offset certain of the inadequacies of mass

society, the documentary movement can better be seen, Aitken suggests, as a minority communication system, primarily addressed to middle-class elites who might actually have had the capacity to play a significant role in the processes of democratic government. This certainly makes sense in relation to the modes of address of many of the films produced within the movement – but it is another of Aitken's failings that he does not attempt to show in any detail how Grierson's ideas are taken up in the films of the 1930s His sole venture into this area – when looking at *Drifters* – is very fruitful, though marred by a somewhat clumsy and inconsistent textual analysis. Elsewhere, references to films are too often couched in terms of unsubstantiated value judgements as to their worth and success

It is in this respect that the seams of *Film and Reform* are so apparent: there is no proper connection established between the account of Grierson's aesthetic and the account of the documentary movement as a whole. It is almost as if Aitken wants to suggest that Grierson *is* the documentary movement, and that Grierson's thinking and writing after about 1930 is of no real consequence, there is certainly no serious attempt to justify this single-minded concentration on Grierson's thinking. The book could, after all, have been presented as an intellectual biography of Grierson. But it is not, and purports to be much more than this. So why no analysis of the much broader field of discourse produced by the documentary movement through periodicals such as *Cinema Quarterly* and *World Film News*, and of other critical writing by the major protagonists of the movement, notably the extensive publications of Paul Rotha? As Swann points out, 'perhaps the gravest fault [of existing accounts of the documentary movement] has been to continue to emphasise the role of Grierson at the expense of others [and] Paul Rotha has particularly suffered from neglect resulting from this tendency to concentrate upon the work of Grierson' (p. 19; having said that, even Swann has not managed to avoid this fault).

Given the encyclopedic nature of Aitken's book, it is a shame too that there is not more on British intellectual film culture in the 1920s and 1930s (although there is a good section on the contemporary theories of Arnheim and Balázs, and on the similarity of Grierson's theory of film to theirs and to contemporary formalist aesthetics) Grierson, after all, was not the only film critic or theorist active in Britain in these years, and the context of that film culture was surely as influential as Grierson's own training in philosophical idealism Thus the theory of film developed by Grierson in the 1920s seems fairly typical of contemporary debates about film as a synthetic art which yet has its own specificity; there is nothing unusual about his assertion that the story must be paramount, nor about his modernist aesthetic of movement and energy.

What is perhaps more original at this stage of Grierson's thinking

is his belief that the epic dramatic narrative can – and indeed should – present a complex value system in terms accessible to a mass public. In terms of Grierson's own trajectory, and the trajectory of the documentary movement as a whole, it is interesting that this early theory of epic film (Victor Turin's *Turksib* [1929] seems to have been the ideal model) depends upon a strong narrative, which can depict individuals while at the same time situating them firmly in the social environment, establishing the interdependence of individual and social relations Grierson shifted away from this position, having come to the conclusion that commercial cinema inevitably trivializes issues, while a State-sponsored cinema would not have the capacities to develop such an epic practice. Yet the move towards the story-documentary in the late 1930s might be seen precisely as a return to this way of thinking: but this is not a point which Aitken takes up.

Swann, on the other hand, does pay more attention to films, these story-documentaries included; but he generally deals with them descriptively and in terms of the organization of production from a managerial point of view. It is not the aim of either of these books to analyse film texts in detail, yet both would have benefited substantially from attempting such analysis

The first thing that strikes one about *The British Documentary Film Movement* is that it is so much easier to read than *Film and Reform*'s rather dry tones: altogether, it is a more fluent, better written, and better edited book Swann presents a much more straightforward narrative account of the institutional development of documentary film in the period between 1926 and 1946, of its position within the civil service, and of the contemporary discourse about public relations and government film propaganda. For the most part, it is a thoroughly researched and very self-contained history, a useful complement to, and sharing many concerns with, Margaret Dickinson's and Sarah Street's equally well-researched *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government, 1927–1984*.[1] However, in the conclusion to *The British Documentary Film Movement*, documentary is situated in a context new to the book, namely the debate about national cinema. Clearly, the place of the documentary movement within British film culture gives it a privileged position in any discussion about British cinema as a national cinema and its relations with Hollywood. But this is not the framework within which the rest of the book is written, and to try to deal with such matters in so brief a space inevitably leads to a somewhat superficial approach, despite a useful chapter on the place of documentary film in contemporary debates about trade propaganda and national projection. Swann did of course deal with the question of national cinema in a previous work, *The Hollywood Feature Film in Post-War Britain*[2] – although again not entirely successfully, given the central and erroneous assumption, repeated

1 London British Film Institute 1985

2 London Croom Helm, 1987

here, that British feature films were never popular with British audiences.

One of the most valuable aspects of Swann's research is his attempt to present a coherent and accurate assessment, by going back to unpublished records, of the sorts and sizes of audiences which the documentary films of the 1930s reached. Swann also attends to some of the differences and conflicts within the documentary movement left out of Aitken's version of Grierson-as-the-movement Swann notes, for instance, that 'Grierson's calvinistic outlook was . . not by any means wholly shared by all of his proteges' (p 176), and stresses that Rotha in particular developed a personal style of filmmaking quite distinct from the Grierson influence. And there is an important revision of the popular view that the documentary movement was ignored by a stupid government and civil service when it came to planning a propaganda machine for the war years Swann shows on the contrary that documentary filmmaking and the official GPO Film Unit were always at the forefront of official thinking and planning – if not in the way the documentarists themselves thought most desirable.

It is for this kind of detailed revisionism, and for the comprehensive elaboration of a variety of historical contexts for making sense of the documentary movement, that these two books are to be welcomed. What is needed now is an equally comprehensive analysis of the films produced by the movement, of the film culture in which they circulated, and in particular of contemporary debates about national cinema – for it is in such areas of film history and criticism that Aitken and Swann, for better or worse, have the least to say. On the other hand, film studies has much to learn from the thorough historicizing of a film movement to be found in *Film and Reform* and *The British Documentary Film Movement*